The Sky Buddies
Cap Rock Flyers

Sermon
from
Stuart

It did not take Austin long to get to the ground and start for the plane, which had burst into flames.

Cap Rock Flyers

By

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Etc.

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This is the second book of Jim and Bob the Flying Buddies, and their many adventures at home in Texas. They discover who the mysterious Don Haurea is, and they get a chance to present their friends, the Canadian Mounted Police, with the promised horseshoes.

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I

THE EMERALD RINGS

"Whoop-ee, Buddy, look where we are! Zowee, what a State!"

"She's the queen of them all," came the hearty response. Enthusiastic grins decorated the faces of James Austin and his stepbrother, Robert Caldwell, Jim and Bob for short; Buddies for shorter. Jim was piloting their right-up-to-the-minute plane, Her Highness, and they were returning to their home land after giving the U. S. and a portion of Canada the once-over. It had been a wonderful trip, and in sturdy old Vermont the boys had run into enough thrills to content any pair for the rest of their natural lives and now the young fellows looked for-

ward to hard riding, cattle punching, and such every-day routine work as the Texas ranch along Cap Rock had to offer.

In making the trip north the step-brothers had followed a hop-and-stop course along the coast line, so they set an entirely different route, a sort of zig-zag way which took them over Washington, then as far as the Pacific, and finally back across the western border of their own State. Both had fine observation glasses, and a pair was pressed to Bob's eyes to give him a closer view of the loved landscape. He saw the Rio Grande winding leisurely two thousand feet below, beyond were miles and miles of rolling sand, desert-like in its sameness, then he picked out spindle-legged steel towers that marked the new oil fields. Tiny towns that had grown up like mushrooms in a few week's time, and bunches of oyster-colored donkeys grazing in parched pastures.

The young fellow knew that the wiry beasts of burden were as valuable to the communities as cayuses or bronchos were on the cattle ranches further west, but he gave them only a casual glance. What was a donkey in comparison to a fury-eyed pony that

would buck with joy when the saddle was thrown across his back? Bob grinned again as he thought of the two pintos—his own King Tut, and Jim's Scuttle, who were probably at that moment tearing around the house corral, stopping occasionally to poke their velvety noses between the heavy posts of the enclosure and nickering anxiously for freedom.

"An hour more and we'll be forking the horses," Jim shouted.

"Aw, speed up," Bob urged. "Don't go to sleep!" There was a note of impatience in his voice, and his step-brother gave him an understanding glance. Her Highness was banked and zoomed to thirty thousand feet, the course was set on a bee line, and every ounce of power was put to instant use as they cut their way forward. The wind howled through the wires, shrieking a protest, but neither of the boys paid a partical of attention.

Keeping his wits about him Jim attended to his job, but it was more or less mechanical so he could permit his mind to wander a bit. He thought of the Fenton's in North Hero, Vermont, and was glad that Bob's

hospitable Aunt and Uncle need no longer worry because of the loss of their principle source of income, the turkey farm. It struck him as odd that no one had ever suspected Hezzy Burley of stealing the young birds himself, then he accounted for it by recalling that Hezzy had lived all his life in the vicinity, and had apparently been as honest as his neighbors. It wasn't until the border-jumpers got him into their clutches, determined to use the old farm house on Isle La Motte as a hang-out for undesirable aliens smuggled into the United States, that he turned to being a thief on his own account. Jim thought of those breathless minutes before his lariat caught the gang-leader by the leg, and he wondered where he got the nerve to attempt such a feat.

"Dumb-headedness," he assured himself. "This hero stuff is bunk," he added. "A fellow does the only thing he thinks he can, and if he doesn't get bumped off he's lucky." Then his mind went to their new friends, the Mounties, Allen Ruhel the chief at Quebec and Sergeant Bradshaw. He thought of the night after the furious battle in the ravine when the medals had been pinned to their

lapels, and when Bob had promised to decorate them with horseshoes if they visited the ranch. He hoped they would come sometime, they were first rate fellows every one of them. Besides all this, in the boy's luggage was a letter from the U. S. Post Office Department thanking the youngsters for their prompt action in saving the life of Phil Mason, the air-mail man, and the mail.

"It's been a grand trip," Bob spoke through the speaking tube and Jim nodded agreement.

They certainly had had a whale of a time. In his mental vision Jim saw again the strange boy—the young prince of an ancient race. This was the hardest part of their experience to make real, but in his shirt pocket, pressing hard against his chest, was the huge emerald with its queer little tube, while each of the boys wore a ring with one of the green stones set deep and surrounded by queer designs that meant something to any member of that strange clan. Jim wished that they had taken a moment to question Corso or the boy as to the meaning of the writing, but great guns, they had been so excited after hours of helping stranded

families from the danger zone of Lake Champlain, then discovering the boy in the strange costume of his own race, that it was no wonder that a little matter like an individual's identity, or a phrase of a lost language, had been entirely forgotten. Suddenly, in the distance he spied the jagged edge of Cap Rock as it cut across the country like a rugged back bone.

"Almost there," he shouted, but Bob was too happy to do more than nod his head. Directly beneath them stretched miles of grain fields and further south began the huge cattle ranches. Her Highness' nose was brought about sharply for the wind had taken advantage of the pilot's abstraction to drive them a bit out of the course. Five minutes later Pearl River came into their range of vision, like a piece of blue ribbon dropped carelessly across the landscape. Then the engine gave a warning cough and Bob glanced at the indicator board.

"Hey Buddy, you're almost out of gas," he exclaimed in disgust.

"Howling coyotes, so I am, and that's the last tank." They looked below for a place where the supply might be replenished, and

finally picked out a ranch house in front of which stood a limousine.

"They'll have some," Bob announced with relief. Her Highness was already gliding earthward, and Jim guided her toward an open spot not far from the long barns.

"I say, Buddy, this is that Greaser Don's place," Jim exclaimed softly, for now the engine was silenced, they could speak to each other. Bob glanced apprehensively about.

"That's right and the old boy doesn't exactly encourage visitors, unless he's changed since we left. I can see where we roll our crate off the premises. Oh, rats, and there's his foreman. We'll be lucky if he doesn't set the dogs on us." The boys could see the tall, lanky foreman who was staring at them with anything but a cordial welcome on his dark features.

The Don's place was one of the few left from old Spanish dominion days, and the present owner, who had inherited it and taken possession only three years before, had let it be known that he did not choose to mingle with his neighbors, any of them. It was rumored that he was a highly educated man, well versed in the sciences, and the

ranchers thought his unfriendliness was due to disappointment in love, or else somebody had embittered him against mankind generally.

As Her Highness glided to the ground and rolled to a stop, the boys took in the general lay-out of the long, low, glaring-white home set in a great grove of pecan trees. There was a winding road, lined with ancient willows, which twined picturesquely overhead, leading to the piazza which extended across the front of the house, and on to the outbuildings near where the boys hesitated in the cock-pit.

"Well, I'm getting out," Jim announced. The foreman was striding swiftly toward them and by one hand he held two huge ugly-looking dogs on leashes.

"What do you want?" he demanded abruptly.

"We're out of gas—

"This isn't a filling station," the chap answered.

"We know that, but we haven't got enough to go any further. Let us buy or borrow enough to get down the Cap—"

"There's no—"

"What is it?" The boys turned and for the first time in their lives beheld the tall Don, who looked as if he might have stepped out of some painting. He wore faultless riding clothes, well tailored, boots that glistened in the sunshine, and a hat which had cost a small fortune and he was about thirty years old.

"We're out of gas—" Bob started awkwardly and the man stared at him coolly with a pair of keen dark eyes that brooked no nonsense.

"Out of gas," he repeated. "What you mean is that you dumped it—or probably you have a tank full. You're like a lot of other too-inquisitive boys who have never learned the art of minding your own business—"

"Perhaps we are," Jim cut in quickly. "You seem to know something about planes, sir." He took off his gloves and his helmet as he spoke and went on in as emphatic a tone as he could muster. "We cannot prove that we didn't dump the supply, but you are welcome to examine the tanks if you care to do so." He stepped aside, and because it was a trick with him, ran his fingers

through his hair. The Don turned his attention to Austin and suddenly his eyes rested on the boy's hand. Jim thought he saw a slight change of expression in the man's face, but it was gone almost instantly.

"Where did you come from?" he asked sharply.

"North. We've been to a place in Vermont called North Hero visiting my step-mother's sister. I'm Jim Austin and this is my brother —step-brother, Bob Caldwell. Dad's ranch is further down the Cap," Jim answered.

"North Hero, strange name," the Don remarked.

"It's a great little place. We were there almost a month," Bob told him, hoping they would find some way to break through the chap's habitual reserve.

"Among my hobbies is a fancy for jewels," the Don said suddenly. "Will you sell that emerald, Mr. Austin? I'll give you all the gas you want and pay you a good price."

"Sell the ring, Clattering Cats, I should say I won't," Jim answered promptly. "We each have one, and the—" He stopped abruptly recalling the fact that they had agreed not to mention Corso and his young

nephew. It flashed into his mind that this man might be another enemy of the two mysterious characters. "The rings are not for sale, sir." He shut his lips firmly, and then he did see a smile, a very faint one flash over the man's face.

"All right, I shall not urge you to sell a prized possession. May I ask you to permit me to examine it?"

"You may look at it on my finger, but I won't take it off," Jim replied and he extended his hand. The Don stepped close and gazed intently at the green emerald. His lips moved, but he did not utter a sound, then he looked up and spoke to the foreman in a language neither of the boys recognized. The man's manner became less belligerent as he listened, and when the speech was finished, he was standing at attention.

"My man will supply you with gas, all you want. He knows something about airplanes, although he is not much of a pilot. I know your father's ranch and Mr. Austin slightly. It is past lunch time. Come to the house and have refreshments. You can notify your family that you will be along soon. The telephone is in the house. Come." He turned on

his heel and started to lead the way. For a moment Bob hesitated. He didn't like the looks of the thing at all. It flashed through his mind that it was some sort of trick and that they had better watch their step or they'd get caught in something unpleasant.

"I say we—"

"Thank you, sir," Jim cut in. "We'll be glad to accept." He remembered that the Don belonged to a class of men who, in generations past, had made the state famous for its hospitality. There were very few of them left, but to refuse refreshments would have been the height of ill-breeding. In the years when he and his Dad had lived alone, the elder Austin had told him something of those by-gone days, and the courtesy which was extended to travelers everywhere.

Presently they stepped on to the piazza and the Don clapped his hands. In a moment a servant appeared, eager question in his eyes, then he saw the strange boys and his expression changed to one of surprise. Again the man spoke in that foreign tongue, then nodded to his guests.

"He will show you where to make yourselves comfortable. You need not hurry un-

less you wish to. I run my household on the first of your country's First Lady's mottoes. Perhaps you know that Martha Washington had a very comforting rhyme on her sun dial."

"I never heard of it, sir," Jim answered.

"Having heard it once you cannot forget it because of its simplicity. You can say it almost any way you like to arrange the lines. As I recall them at the moment, they are:

If you are behind,
Never mind,
Time is kind."

"I never supposed that Martha Washington would have anything like that around," Jim chuckled. "Always thought of her as a very busy sort of somebody who woudn't care for dawdling."

"Which merely proves that our mental conceptions of people rarely does them full justice," he replied gravely.

"Come," the surprised serving man said softly and he led the way through the first door, into a low dark-paneled room, across and out into a delightful portico that had a fountain playing in the centre. On the oppo-

site side they were ushered into a huge room done in green, and there they could have indulged in almost anything in the nature of freshening up. A deep pool about twelve feet long occupied one end, over a stone platform hung a shower, and along the wall were benches and shallow basins, with soap and fine towels of all sizes.

"Whew," Bob whistled when the attendant silently withdrew. "What a place! Gosh, shouldn't mind diving right in. But gee whiz, Jim, what did you say we'd come in for? I've got a hunch there is something funny about this business. What in heck did that greaser—"

"I say, Old Iron Sides, there's one thing I'm sure you want to get out of your bean. He isn't a greaser or anything like one. His grandfather's grandfather, or somebody way back came to this state and Dad told me that they have always been a mighty decent tribe. They mind their own business and believe me this place pays well every year! Perhaps this Don fellow has some sort of grouch against the world, but he's been courteous to us, and it's up to us to be gentlemen. Methinks it's a mighty fine way to end up

our holiday. Great guns, I'll bet we're the first men in this part of the country to cross the threshold. It's a real adventure—"

"You're crazy. What does he want, these rings?" Bob interrupted.

"We'll know before we get away—"

"If we get away."

"Sure. Well, if we're going to be kidnapped let's have our faces clean. This looks too good to pass up."

"What do you suppose that guy is doing with Her Highness?" Bob insisted.

"I hope he is giving the lady a drink so that she will be in proper form to take us home by and by—"

"In the sweet by and by, maybe," Bob grumbled.

"You have been associating with so many bandits lately that it has developed suspicion in your usually trusting nature," Jim retorted. "Come on, pitch in, and let's not keep him waiting." It didn't take them long to make themselves presentable, and having shed their flying suits, much to Bob's disgust, they finally emerged looking like a pair of highly respectable young Texas gentlemen.

"This way." The servant appeared from someplace and led them to a corner of the portico where a small table was laid for three and even if they were boys they noticed that the whole place had an atmosphere of luxury and beauty. There were pottery jugs of weird design and bright colors, rich silver service and beautiful glassware. The Don came to greet them as if they were important guests instead of a pair of boys who had dropped uninvited out of the sky. They were assigned their places and their host was so disarmingly congenial that even Bob was put somewhat at his ease. During the service of the meal, which was a most appetizing one, the man talked on airplanes and other subjects of current interest, and finally he swung the conversation around to the Champlain islands.

"North Hero is one of the towns, or townships, which has been suffering from floods, isn't it?" he inquired.

"Yes, but jinks some of the other places around there were almost entirely submerged and it was pretty hard for a few days. The people whose homes were not dam-

aged had to take in dozens of stranded families," Jim answered.

"And some of the summer campers lost everything they had," Bob added.

"Pretty bad. I do not recall ever hearing of the place before, but I understand it is quite historic."

"Sure is. Allen boys lived not very far from there. There's a park dedicated to them in Burlington and some of their descendants own a part of the land that was granted to the family."

"Very interesting. I expect that you met some odd characters."

"Oh sure, we met—" Bob began, but Jim cut in for fear he was going to mention Corso.

"We met mounted Canadian officers, bandits, robbers, airmen—and some right fine fellows. We took quite a shine to some of them. Never supposed I'd like a Northerner, or anyone I met in the North, quite so much."

"It must have been a very delightful spring. Did you acquire your rings while you were there, if I may ask the question?" He smiled at Jim.

"Tell you what, sir, if you don't mind,

we'd rather not talk about how we acquired those rings—we came by them honestly—but Bob and I decided talking about it wouldn't do any good and we agreed not to mention it to *anyone*. Somehow," his face flushed as it occurred to him that he was talking too much—"I think no harm can come to me telling you this much sir. Excuse me if I seem rude." The Don looked down at his plate for a moment and no one spoke, then he smiled as he lifted his eyes.

"You have nothing to apologize for, my boy. I hope that you will pardon my inquisitiveness. I will say this much, I am glad that you reached the decision you did regarding where you obtained such remarkable emeralds, and, I am quite sure that they came into your possession by the most honorable means. By the way, I have a number of books in my library, quite a collection on aviation from its earliest inception to the present time. If you care to pay me a visit, I shall be happy to show them to you."

"Gosh, that will be great," Bob answered quickly. Anything about flying won his heart.

"Thank you," Jim accepted. "We've been

away for a while and of course we have to get home now as soon as we can, but sometime when you are not too busy, it will be interesting to see your library. Dad has some pretty good books, but nothing out of the ordinary."

"Then it's a—a date."

"It's a date," Jim grinned, but Bob was scowling again. He couldn't make head nor tail of the thing.

Later the boys were back in the cock-pit of Her Highness who was certainly in prime condition. The dark foreman was standing near by and the Don shook hands cordially.

"Remember the date," he smiled.

"Sure will. So long." Jim opened the throttle and Her Highness went off in grand style. As a matter of fact she never flew better, and it occurred to the boy pilot that the foreman-mechanic must have put her in prime condition. They zoomed high and fast, and finally leveled off for the last lap. In a little while the motor was shut off for a long glide to the Austin ranch house where they could barely see tiny objects moving about the familiar grounds.

"Gee, it's good to get home. Say, what do

you make of that gre—Don?" Jim glanced at his brother thoughtfully.

"I say, do you remember when that boy gave us these rings?"

"Of course, think I'm losing my mind?"

"Remember what he said," Jim added.

"Sure I do. He said we were to wear the rings, that there were a lot of his people scattered over the map, or something like that, and wherever we met one, he would help us if he saw the ring. What's that got to do with the man who runs that ranch?"

"Well, I think it's got a lot to do with it."

"You're crazy," Bob exploded.

"Maybe, but who cares. He said there were a lot of his people studying sciences and everything, and any one of them would help us if he saw the ring. Well, old man, I think we met the first one," Jim declared.

"The Don!"

"Sure."

"Bunk," Bob exploded, but as the facts flashed through his mind he more than half believed that his step-brother was right. Just then they could hear the shouts of men running to greet them, and he dismissed everything else from his thoughts.

II

HOME

"Hello Dad!"

"Hello Mother!" The Flying Buddies came to a stop near the corral of the K-A ranch and grinned widely at the couple coming to welcome them home. The man was tall, his hair slightly grey, and his eyes like his son's had a merry twinkle. His wife, Bob's mother, was short and had fluffy hair that waved off her face, a slender figure and a ready smile on her fine face.

"So you finally arrived. We got a telephone message that you had landed at the Box-Z. Don Haurea's servant, Zargo said you would be along soon." Mr. Austin explained.

"We ran out of gas," Jim told his father and by that time the boys were loose from safety belts. Then they hopped out and without ceremony or bashfulness, each gave the parents a soul-satisfying embrace, and there was no lack of sincerity in the man's welcome to his step-son, nor of Mrs. Austin's reception of Jim.

"How did you ever happen to land there?" Mrs. Austin asked as soon as she could get out from the depths of broad young shoulders.

"Had to drop somewhere. Reckon we miscalculated a bit in getting in a supply and we had to drop where we were. The Don was very pleasant. He's a nice chap, Dad."

"He should be. He comes from a remarkable family—"

"Well, why the heck is he so unneighborly?" Bob demanded.

"I do not believe that he really means to be unfriendly. Several times I have gone to him for co-operation in things that have affected the ranchers generally and he has always met me more than half way. I think that he is interested in highly scientific matters, does a great deal of experimenting in one way or another, and as he has the means to gratify his bent we shouldn't condemn him for being disinterested in things which seem to him of lesser importance. It was evident to me that he does not care to waste his time by too great devotion to trivial details that some one else can do as well. The world needs such men, my boy—we should

make no progress at all unless a few of them worked by themselves."

"Oh," Bob exclaimed. "I never thought of it in that way. Don't remember ever being on the place, and I guess I had an impression from kid-days that outsiders were not welcome even when the old man—gentleman I mean, was alive."

"Ever since I have known anything about them there has been a certain reticence in the family, and when this young man returned from his travels the trait seemed accentuated in him. It isn't a bad one, really, but unfortunately rumors were afloat which were neither intelligent nor kind. On your own ranch, you probably overheard odds and ends, and being twenty miles away you didn't come into close contact with anyone from the Box-Z—"

"Gosh, sir, whenever I saw Zargo, I turned tail and ran as fast as the bronc could carry me," Bob admitted.

"And you had no idea from what you were running," the man smiled. "Want one of the boys to put Her Highness in cotton? I presume that you will both be forking a saddle as soon as you can get into chaps."

"Sure thing, but we want to look around and see that the place hasn't changed any," Bob laughed.

"My goodness, my dear, you haven't been gone so long," Mrs. Austin had to laugh at his comical expression.

"It seemed long to us," Jim answered with a chuckle.

"Before you do anything else, for goodness sake, go speak to those ponies or they'll break through the fence," Mrs. Austin urged, for the pintos were nickering furiously, and rushing against their enclosure as if determined to reach their young masters.

"Now, don't bust a lung, Scuttle," Jim said softly and he turned quickly to the eager pony.

"Keep your shirt on, Tut, old fellow," Bob admonished. They hurried to the corral, leaped to the top, and in a moment the ponies were nosing them both as if to make sure that there was no mistake in their identity. Tut nibbled at the buckles on Bob's flying suit, while Scuttle calmly investigated the pockets for sweets.

"You're right, I didn't forget," Jim

chuckled and he fished out a lump of sugar, while his step-brother produced a similar delicacy for his favorite. They spent several minutes rubbing the velvety coats and were finally satisfied that the horses had neither aged nor suffered any lack of care during their absence.

"I turned them in there off the range this morning and they certainly did object." That was Sam Carlton, the overseer, and the two boys shook hands with him cordially.

"They look prime," Jim declared. "Well, come on Buddie, if we are going to get a ride, we'd better start. See you again, Sam. It's great to be home." They hurried to the house and found Mr. and Mrs. Austin seated comfortably on the long veranda.

"Feel that the trip was worth-while?" Mrs. Austin asked.

"It sure was great," Bob answered enthusiastically.

"We received an air-mail letter yesterday from Belle and I judge you had a very exciting visit. She said that you probably wouldn't tell us half the news, so she sent a long letter—"

"Oh-mah-gosh, then we don't need to give you details," Jim answered.

"She said that you got several acknowledgements—"

"Oh, we got some things pinned on us," Bob admitted. "I'll show you the medal the Canadian Mounties gave us after the dinner, the letter from the Post Office and all, as soon as we get into ground clothes." Making the change did not take them very long, then they sat down and had a good chat with the parents, and at last they were ready to go for their ride. Mr. Austin went with them as far as the barn where they found their saddles and taking them off their hooks started toward the corral. The two ponies came to the bars nickering eagerly, and even Mr. Austin had to laugh at them.

"I'd like to speak to you, sir." The three turned quickly and saw a small wiry looking man who wore the prevailing costume of a cowboy, which was well worn, but his face was whiter than an out-door man's usually is.

"What can I do for you?" Mr. Austin asked. The chap took off his hat, he had very little hair, and what there was hung

scraggy. There was something about him that held Jim's attention so he listened to what followed.

"My name's Johnson, sir. I'm a cow man but I've been in the hospital for the last three months. I'd like a job. Your overseer said to see you, because you do all the hiring.

"Well—" the rancher started.

"Johnson looks hungry, Dad. He'd better go ask the cook to give him a feed, then he'll feel more like talking," Jim cut in, and he looked directly into his father's face. It was a surprising performance, for Jim never butted-in on things which did not concern him. The elder Austin thought that his son wanted to talk with him a few moments more before the pair started on their ride, so he nodded.

"By all means, my man. The bunk-house is there. The cook will give you something. Have you got a horse?"

"He's over there." Johnson nodded to a nag as sorry looking as himself, which stood with his nose almost to the ground and the reins hanging about his feet.

"Put him in the barn." Johnson started off with a nod of thanks, and Mr. Austin

turned to his son, who stared earnestly at the cowboy's back. "What is it, my son?"

"Dad, don't hire that fellow—"

"What's the matter with him," Bob asked quickly. His sympathy was aroused for the man who looked as if trouble had been riding behind him and riding hard.

"His name is not Johnson," Jim declared softly. "It's Dyke, or it was when we saw him in Vermont—"

"Vermont? He's been in the hospital," Mr. Austin objected.

"Hospital nothing. He can't fool me even with that make-up. We saw him in Vermont and he's no good. Give him a feed, and feed his nag, but don't let him work here, or anywhere around here. You tell the other ranchers about him, and get him out of the country. That's the best thing you can do with him." Jim urged earnestly.

"What do you know about him?" Mr. Austin urged. It did not seem to him that the chap who called himself Johnson was misrepresenting himself. The rancher had met many stranded cow-punchers and this one certainly had all the earmarks of an old timer down on his luck.

"I can't tell you now, Dad, but I'll explain later. I haven't anything very much against him, but I know he isn't what he's making out, although he may be an old cow-hand gone bad. Don't have him around, please."

"Well, all right," the boy's father agreed reluctantly. Of course he knew that there was plenty of work on the ranches that a man could do easily while he regained his strength, and Jim's proposal to get entirely rid of the fellow did not seem exactly humane.

"Don't you recognize him?" Jim asked Caldwell.

"I don't know. I shouldn't have thought of it myself, but there does seem to be a resemblance. Just then Johnson was almost facing the trio as he started to lead his horse to the barn, and Bob nodded. "Guess you're right, old man."

"We'll be off," Jim sighed with relief. He didn't want their first day at home marred by the knowledge that an enemy of Corso and his young nephew was around. The two leaped into their saddles and rode off at a swift gallop, the ponies with bits in their teeth, raced madly, gave an occasional buck just for pure joy, and the riders had to pay

strict attention to the business of keeping their seats.

"Atta boy," Bob shouted and he waved his hat in approved cowboy style as Tut leaped a fence instead of going around. Scuttle came close behind and scaled the top bar as if it were nothing at all in his young life. Finally the broncs were satisfied, but they were several miles from the ranch house and the home corrals, and Jim drew rein a bit.

"Sputtering sea-lions, what do you suppose that lad is doing in this neighborhood?" he demanded.

"Well, as you so aptly put it when I make such an unanswerable inquiry, you can search me. Looks as if our mis-lead didn't work somehow or perhaps Burnam got rid of Dyke. They didn't seem exactly crazy about each other at Stumble Inn and the big fellow may have chucked him. If that's the case, he is down-and-out, probably, and it's kind of beastly not to give him a job when he needs one."

"Maybe it is, Bob, but just the same, I've got a hunch there is more to it than that," Jim answered.

"Why should he come here? Think he's following us?"

"There's no reason why he should. none that I can guess," Jim replied.

"Think he recognized us?" was Bob's next question.

"Haven't an idea. He didn't show it if he did, and they did not get as good a look at us as we did of them. We are a bit different in chaps than when Burnam took us for country hicks."

"If he's on some mischief wouldn't it be better to give him a job and keep an eye on him?" Caldwell suggested.

"Maybe it would," Jim replied. "Hope I haven't busted into anything. Say, I'm riding over to the Box-Z."

"Kind of early to pay a thank-you call," Bob objected strenuously, but Jim persisted, so the pony's heads were turned toward the great ranch and in due time the boys drew rein before the door. The quiet man servant who had received them before came out immediately and his face showed that he was surprised at their reappearance.

"I'd like to speak to Don Haurea," Jim announced.

"He is busy. May I take a message?"

"Wish you'd tell him that I'd like to see him. Maybe it's important and maybe it isn't, I don't know," Jim urged.

"Dismount." The man placed two chairs and the boys seated themselves. In a moment the man returned. "This way." He led them through the house again and on to a corner of the portico. They waited ten minutes then the Don appeared wearing a cool white suit.

"This in an unexpected pleasure," he greeted them. "Please accept my apologies for keeping you waiting."

"Well, we owe you an apology for coming, perhaps, I don't know. May we talk with you somewhere that is—absolutely private?"—Jim began.

"Come." He led them into a room that looked as if it was in the center of the building. There were no windows, but it was artifically cooled somehow, and the air was fresh. On the stone floor were several thick rugs, there were no decorations on the walls; and the room was furnished with a long heavy table and several high-backed straight chairs. "Be seated," the Don invited. The

boys took the chairs offered and the man's eyes appraised them speculatively.

"This morning you asked us to sell the emerald rings," Jim began a bit awkwardly for he felt uncertain about how to proceed.

"You have changed your minds?"

"No, it isn't that," Jim said hastily. "Maybe I'm a full grown nut, but I've got an idea, and if I tell you something in confidence and there's nothing to it, will you forget it?"

"My memory is most accommodating, my dear Jim," the Don smiled gravely.

"It's this way. When we were in North Hero we did meet a couple. We both liked them a lot—their skins were dark, like southern people, and they were finely built—"

"Yes," the Don said as the boy hesitated.

"They did some terracing and draining on the Fenton's farm. It was a fine piece of work, better than the engineers that were hired could do, and it redeemed the bog. Bob's uncle was mighty grateful about it, but they didn't charge him for the work. I think they were interested in experimenting—"

"Yes." Don Haurea eyed the boy sharply,

then he pressed a small knot in the edge of the table beside him. A tiny door, that had been absolutely invisible before, swung open. "Perhaps this will give you confidence to go on, Jim," he said very softly, and he produced a huge emerald so exactly like the ones the boys owned, that they gasped.

"Gosh all hemlock," Jim said quickly. "I'm glad you showed me that." He fished around in his own pocket and produced the third jewel. "Bob has one too, so I can tell you what's on my mind."

"And we needn't be afraid that you are an enemy—"

"I am a friend," the Don replied earnestly.

"That's great. You can tell if my hunch is all nuts. The pair, we don't know the younger one's name, but the man was called Corso, lived in a shack. I think they were on the island a few months, perhaps a year, I don't know. Anyway we took a shine to them and tried to teach the boy some English words—"

"That was kind—" the Don smiled.

"Yes, wasn't it! He can speak it better than we can. Well, you read of the flood and all that, and probably you know all about

what happened to the couple. One day, when the water was pretty bad, two men came to Stumble Inn and asked for a meal. Mrs. Fenton fixed it for them, then she went into the cellar trying to save things that were getting soaked as the water seeped in, and Bob and I were on the porch. We could hear the big fellow talking and made out that he was trying to locate a couple. They expected to get immensely wealthy when they found them. While we were on the little piazza, we saw Corso step up and look in. He didn't let the fellows see him, then he went off. I had another hunch, so Bob and I went in and let the two fellows think we were country hicks. They asked a lot of questions, wanted to know about any 'queer characters' and we told them a man and boy had been there but had gone into Canada, to Toronto. Then we told Corso. I hitched on the back of the limousine and know they got out of the country, and when I got back, Corso and his nephew were going over to Fisher's island where they stayed until Bob and I could get them to New York State."

"I know a little of what you did, but when I learned the story, of course I did not know

that it was my neighbor's sons who carried the couple across the Lake Champlain."

"When you were so generous this morning I made up my mind that you are one of the people the boy told us about. He said that anyone seeing the emerald rings would help us and you did. To make a long story short, one of those men, the little fellow, came to our ranch just before we started to ride. He's all dolled out to look like a seedy cowboy, but he's Dyke, we're sure. He told my father his name is Johnson. I told Dad not to take him on and to warn the other ranchers that he's no good."

"I see," the Don remarked very thoughtfully. He sat silent for fully a minute. "Do you have any reason to believe they followed you here, I mean home?"

"Can't say but I don't see why they should expect to get anything out of us—" Jim answered.

"Would he have come to the K-A looking for work," Bob put in quickly.

"It doesn't seem likely." They discussed the matter and Don Haurea questioned the two closely. Finally he seemed satisfied. "I greatly appreciate your coming to me, boys."

"Maybe it would have been better if I let Dad give him a job, then we could have kept an eye on him," Jim said ruefully. "Bob said that as we were coming over."

"No, I believe that your course was the wiser one. I am very glad to know the chap Dyke has put in an appearance here. Forewarned is forearmed." He smiled at them kindly then went on. "You have placed Corso and the boy more deeply in your debt, to say nothing of myself. May I impress upon you that at any time if there is anything I can do for you, I shall consider it a privilege to do it?"

"Great Scott, we didn't do anything more than try to be decent—"

"That is a great deal, my boy. If everyone followed that rule the world would progress at amazing strides. You promise to get in touch with me if ever there is anything I can do to repay your service."

"Well, all right," Jim agreed but his face flushed in confusion.

"If you are interested in advance experiments I may be able to show you something that you will enjoy seeing," Don Haurea offered.

"That's great—hope we haven't imposed on you—or anything." Jim began to feel a bit confused again, but the Don smiled.

"I am more glad than I can tell you at having this second opportunity to get acquainted with you both." The Don rose, and the boys did likewise. Thoughtfully the three left the little quiet room and went back to the portico. "Here are some especially choice flowers. When you come again you must gather a bouquet for Mrs. Austin."

"Thank you, sir." Bob spoke up then because that seemed to him a mighty thoughtful suggestion. "She's got a dandy garden but only the usual flowers, roses and things like that."

"We'd be glad to have you come to the ranch. My Dad knew your father, but of course, you're probably very busy—"

"That is true, nevertheless I shall pay you a visit." They were on the outside veranda and the ponies were standing waiting with their reins dangling. "And come again."

The boys leaped into the saddles where they felt much more at their ease and tipped their hats before galloping off down the winding road under the drooping willows.

III

"LITTLE JIMMY AUSTIN"

"Jim, my son, I wish that you would fly to Laville and file some papers for me in the record department at the Court House. On the way back stop at Crofton and get some small machinery parts from the freight depot then pick up a few supplies at the general store. If you can do that it will save us a great many hours and we'll send the trucks down later in the month." The family was at breakfast, a few days after the boy's return from Vermont and points north, when Mr. Austin made his request.

"All right, Dad, glad to do it," Jim agreed.

"I can't go along, Old Timer, for I have to ride to the Cross-Bar and give the men a hand with the stock. That will take all day," Bob informed his step-brother.

"Have to stay over?" Jim inquired.

"No, expect to return tonight after supper. I'm going to look at that old dam on the river. Mother says we ought to do something about re-enforcing it or it may cave in."

"It's pretty old and the last year the pressure has been especially great. When we drove there a week ago, your mother and I thought that it should either be re-built or the water diverted back to the main stream of the river. However, drying it might make a difference on the Box-Z, so before that is done Don Haurea should be consulted. If the dam is an advantage to him no doubt he will be willing to meet a share of the expense incurred," Mr. Austin explained.

"Thank you, sir. I'll look at it tonight, or this evening before dark. Do you think we should consult the Don before we do anything about the old dam?" Bob suggested.

"It would be a neighborly thing to do even if the structure is on your ranch."

"I say, I'll fly and get the things for Dad, then come and pick you up, or should you rather crawl home on King Tut—"

"Crawl—" Bob scowled and clenched his fists.

"It won't be flying," Jim laughed.

"Sure, come along. You are not insulting Tut for I'm not going to ride him anyway. Dad wants me to take a couple of broncs and I'll leave them there. We'll permit Her

Highness to carry the saddle back.

"Then it's all set." The boys had finished their meal and they both started about the day's work. In the office Mr. Austin gave the papers to his son, the receipt for the freight, and the list of things to purchase for the ranch. The commissions finished, the man sat leaning his head against a bear skin, a beast he had had a fierce battle with when he was a boy, and by his attitude Jim realized that something more was to follow. He waited patiently and finally his father seemed suddenly to realize that his son was still in the room.

"Anything else, Dad?"

"No—that is. I heard something disquieting last night. Arthur Gordon and his son were here; they appeared quite late while you and Bob were working on your radio."

"Yes," the boy encouraged for he knew that his father wanted to tell him something.

"They were rather mysterious. Anyway, the reason for their visit came out before they left. Fact is, they came to ask questions about Don Haurea. It seems that one of their riders saw your plane go down there yesterday morning. I think it must have

been your plane. I told them that you had a forced landing, that the Don gave you all the gas you wanted and you came home after lunch. That seemed to relieve their minds somewhat, but they have heard odd sort of rumors. As far as anyone knows there are no airplanes on the Box-Z, but several have been seen to land there recently."

"Well, what of it? They may have come down just as we did, Dad, or some of the Don's friends may hop out to visit him. There shouldn't be anything mysterious or suspicious in that these days," Jim said quickly.

"Exactly what I said to them, but some of their men have been listening to gossip, and young Gordon is strongly in favor of going to the Box-Z and demanding on explanation."

"Is it any of their business?" Jim demanded a bit hotly.

"As far as I can see, my son, it isn't and I assured them that I would take no part in such an unneighborly act. We had quite a talk, but I couldn't draw any definite accusation from either of them. They spoke of Haurea's amazing success with his land and stock—"

"Do they think that he is stealing their cattle?"

"They did not go quite so far as that but they did seem to think that Haurea should account for the size of his herd, also give the neighboring ranchers the result of any experiments he has made with his soil. His fields certainly do yield heavy crops where he plants them, his trees are the best in the state of Texas, and he is getting rich while the rest of us are plugging along—that was their contention."

"He's getting rich—that's the rub," the boy growled. "Well Dad, wasn't he rich when he came home, in his own right, I mean? You told me once that that sort of thing can be ascertained in the public records."

"Yes it can if anyone is impudent enough to go and inquire. I should never think of doing such a thing. If my neighbor's knowledge can be used to make his land pay better than mine does I do not feel called upon to demand a share in the information. None of us are in any way restricted in acquiring any knowledge we may care to study; the agricultural department of Washington is

always ready to analyze soil and give advice as to what it is suited for."

"Who are these Gordons? Know anything about them?" Jim asked.

"Not any more than you do, I guess, my son. They bought the ranch adjoining the Cross-Bar, wanted to buy that, but I advised my wife not to sell it. She doesn't need to do that and when he is of age Bob should have it. If he doesn't want to run the place then he can do as he likes with it, but it is hardly fair to deprive him of the opportunity. I believe the boy is very much attached to it. What do you think?"

"Bob's crazy about it," Jim laughed. "I'm glad you didn't let Mom sell it. When he gets hold of it he'll probably do most of the work by airplane—all he can, anyway. He's air-minded all right, but he'd never kick very hard over being grounded on the Cross-Bar."

"Thank you—that's the way I thought he felt. Well, the Gordons offered a very big price, but finally took the other place. They have been neighborly enough, have co-operated on the range and that sort of thing. I don't suppose that you know Gordon, Jr. very well, he's older than you are."

"I never did cotton to him, and I guess he looks upon me as an infant in arms. Anyway, with school and so on we haven't run into each other very often. If I see him first, I duck," Jim answered. "They've lived there about three years now haven't they?"

"Two and a half."

"Aren't they making it pay?"

"I don't know. They seem to have everything they want, cars and machinery and a good breed of cattle. I've always wondered why they ran them along this end of Pearl River instead of below where the pasture is more accessible, but their herd isn't large and of course the river is an unfailing source of water supply. For my part the meeting last night was disquieting. As I talked it over with my wife, and thought about it, the thing appears so vague that I wonder if there is anything behind it all. You're almost a man, my son, so the things which both please and bother me, you should know something about. I hope that *you* are crazy about the *K-A*." He looked at his son a bit wistfully.

"You can bet your boots on that, Dad," Jim grinned broadly.

"Glad to hear it. Now, hop along or you will be too late to go after your brother. Ever been sorry, old man, that I remarried?"

"Not for a minute," Jim chuckled. "Mom and the kid are both great."

"My opinion exactly. Now, hustle up. Oh, don't forget, that paper must be filed before noon. This is Saturday and Court closes."

"I'll jump to it."

A quarter of an hour later Jim leveled Her Highness off at an altitude of five thousand feet and took a survey of the globe beneath him. The ranch houses were some distance behind, but a little way ahead and to his right he picked out a rough, deeply rutted road, and saw a small band of horses running swiftly. His step-brother was hazing them along toward the Cross-Bar on the Pearl River. Bob waved his hat jubilantly, and Jim waggled his wings with equal enthusiasm. A minute later the scene in his range of vision had entirely changed. Instead of very rough surface the land stretched for miles so level that it looked as if it had been smoothed artificially. Here and there were water-holes, the vicinity

right around them worn down by the tramp of millions of head of stock that had been driven there during the past years.

Finally the plane soared across the border of the K-A and went racing on above the Gordon ranch. Jim glanced at it curiously and thought of the strange visit the man and his son had made the night before. The Gordons were comparatively new-comers in the very scattered community and although they had mingled freely with their neighbors, made themselves agreeable whenever possible and showed a disposition to be friendly, they did not seem to fit. They were reputed to be weathy and ran the property in such a disinterested sort of fashion that they gained a reputation of not caring whether it paid or lost money. They had taken their place in the community while Bob and Jim were at school so the boys barely knew them. However, young Austin recalled meeting Gordon Jr., at a barn dance during a short vacation period. He had watched the stranger dancing, set him down as an outsider and thought no more about him.

What Mr. Austin had told the boy about

his late guests of the previous night did appear strange. Why should they be interested in Don Haurea's place, and why should they try to interest the Spaniard's nearest neighbor in taking part in anything unfriendly? It was a question, but no answer came to the boy's mind. The fact that Her Highness had consumed all her gas, needed a new supply when she was above the ancient ranch, and had dropped to earth to replenish it, was not at all out of the ordinary. But it was decidedly out of the ordinary for any Texas rancher to feel that he had a right to an explanation of any sort.

"They are sure out-siders," Jim muttered to himself as he raced through the clouds. By that time the Gordon ranch was rolling into the background, and Jim's thoughts twisted around to Don Haurea. He certainly was an exceptionally clever man, impressive, and not one bit repressive. It was evident that he was not a Spaniard, but belonged to the race Corso and his nephew had spoken about. He was a friend of theirs.

This brought the recollection of Dyke and his surprising appearance. Jim did not think for a moment that Dyke (or Johnson as he

called himself) had followed them from the north. There could be no connection in that quarter. His coming to Cap Rock section of Texas so soon after being in Vermont in search of Corso and his nephew looked as if he knew, in some way, that the Don was in communication with the two. Perhaps he expected to get the information he sought, from or through, Haurea. Corso had told the boys just before they all raced over to the New York side of Lake Champlain, that Burnam was a very bad man and expected to learn of vast riches. That was why he was trailing them. Dyke, was an associate of Burnam's. The boys had seen the pair together at Stumble Inn. Perhaps, thought Jim, when Dyke and Burnam went on into Canada to continue their search, the pair separated, and the little man decided to follow some lead he had picked up, so came south.

"If they are not working together that ought to be an advantage. I wonder if there isn't some way that we can discover where he went when Dad told him there was no work for him at the K-A." The only thing he could think of was to inquire among the

ranchers but that did not look like a very good idea. "Guess I'd better let the Don take care of the matter. He knows about the fellow and he isn't going to be caught napping by such a bum as that." Dyke was dismissed and pleasanter things flashed though Jim's brain. He had been doing so much ruminating on "groundly" matters that he had paid little attention to the distance he had covered, and now he took a swift glance down and saw in the distance the outline of the town where he expected to land and carry out the first of his father's commissions.

Laville was like a great many other Texas towns. It wasn't one of the new ones but it wasn't very big. Swiftly it began to sprawl out lazily in the sunshine before him. The three main streets were lined with great shade trees, and there were five squares designed by a landscape gardener and a delight to the eye. It boasted a small library, two schools, the Court House, in which was also the Hall of Records, municipal offices and the jail. Most of the residences were built of stone and set in attractive surroundings with shrubs, winding drives, and beautiful gardens. All the stores

were on the main block so any sort of business could be transacted without going far. Less than a quarter of a mile out was a huge garage and gas station and as Jim knew the proprietor he selected that for a landing field. There was always someone about who coud keep an eye on Her Highness and see that the plane was not molested.

Presently young Austin rolled up back of the building and, as he expected, had no difficulty getting service. One of the men was driving into the village and the boy got a lift to the Court House. Once inside the long, cool building it did not take him many minutes to attend to his business, and he was glad when he was ready to take the air again. The town was terrifically hot and the temperature made the pilot anxious to get back to a higher altitude.

"Well, my stars if it ain't little Jimmy Austin. I'd know him anywhere I met him even if he has growed up like a cactus plant. How is your paw?" Jim turned quickly and faced a large, over-dressed woman whose hand, as she extended it cordially, was loaded with diamonds. She smiled at him in the most winsome fashion and he frowned

in a futile effort to recall who she might be. He simply couldn't remember. "You know Jimmy, don't you dearie?" Dearie was a stockily built chap with a very long nose, deep set eyes and a forehead that extended past his ears.

"Sure, I know Jimmy," he insisted in a voice that sounded like a bellow.

"Of course you do and isn't he like his Paw? My, it is good to see you dearie. Just like old times." The woman was shaking Jim's hand vigorously and Jim could only stare at her in bewilderment. "Don't you remember us? You were a little shaver."

"Sorry, Marm, but I don't seem to remember," Jim admitted, using the expression of early boyhood days.

"Well, good land, no wonder. You were such a little fellow. My, but didn't I used to cook and scrub and sew for you and your paw after I left the Haurea's. Well, my land sakes." Jim had a faint recollection of a woman who had done such work about the house but somehow this one did not seem at all like Lilly Boome. "This is my boy, Ollie, but you didn't see much of Ollie because when he wasn't working, he was at

school," she explained elaborately.

"No, I don't remember him at all," Jim answered. He hadn't seen or heard anything of Lilly Boome in years. The memories of the rather slovenly woman who had complained continuously and bitterly as she worked about the house were not the kind one usually cherishes. Jim could not keep from showing the amazement at her changed appearance, and she smiled again very coyly.

"Of course you don't and it ain't no wonder, but you do know me?"

"Oh yes, now I do," Jim admitted so she shook his hand again and Ollie took it in such a firm grip that he made the boy's fingers ache.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance again. Old acquaintances shouldn't be forgot. Ma and me come all the way from New York to renew old friendships, and make some new friends. We ben travelin'—ben 'bout everywhere you can think of. We seen the whole world. Took one of them six week tours you know. There ain't nothin' like travelin' even if you are sea-sick all the time like we was. You're lookin' fine. Recorder says you're a right smart boy, own an airplane all your own and chauffeur it your-

self—" He might have talked on endlessly if his mother hadn't put in a word.

"With all our travelin' dearie, you know, we ain't been up in an airplane yet. I guess you came to town in yours. Is it a very big one?"

"Three seater," Jimmy answered innocently.

"My goodness, it must be a beauty, Jimmy. You know, I wouldn't be a bit afeard to ride one with you. It would be a real pleasure," she smiled more winningly than ever and Jimmy began to get an idea of what they wanted of him. "We're going to the Gordon's, that's right by you—just a few miles. Me and Mrs. Gordon's the best friends, met on the steamer and Ollie and me entertained them in New York. They been writin' and writin' for us to come and pay them a visit, so we come at last. It would be a real treat to give them a surprise and get there before they expect us. Junior was to meet us at Crofton—"

"Oh," Jim hesitated. Dropping a couple of passengers at the Gordon's didn't exactly appeal to him that morning, but he couldn't see any good excuse for refusing.

"Now then, I just knew that you'd want to take us that far," Mrs. Boome gushed. "Sure it won't be no trouble? We wouldn't want to put you out for the world!"

"No, my goodness, we could hire, or buy an airplane to take us up for all that, if we'd just thought of it in time," Ollie declared.

"You could have gotten one in Houston, if you came through that way—"

"We didn't, dearie. Fact is, I wouldn't think of trustin' myself with a strange pilot not for a minute, not with the thousands of airplane accidents happenin' every day—"

"They ain't so bad as that, Ma," Ollie put in with a hearty chuckle.

"Well, my land, every time I pick up a paper seems like I see the story of another wreck—"

"You gotta remember that you ain't pickin' up papers very often," Ollie went on relentlessly, and his mother didn't seem to like his manner. Her face darkened and she looked at him angrily, but he only laughed again, so loud that several people passing in and out of the building turned sharply to see what was the difficulty.

"Guess I pick 'em up as often as you

do—" she retorted.

"My plane is at the garage," Jim put in quickly. "I have to stop and do some shopping at Crofton, if you do not mind the stopover, then I'll be glad to take you on to the Gordon's. I can't take your luggage, nothing more than what you can hold in your hands, because I won't have room."

"Oh, that's all right. We'll send our things on by express. We got our ticket to Crofton, and the trunks will go along on the train," Ollie assured him quickly.

"Guess we'd better get started. If we don't, the Gordons may send the car for you," Jim suggested. For some unexplainable reason he wished heartily that he had not run into the couple. He couldn't think of a thing objectionable about giving them the ride, but for the first time in his life he felt genuinely inhospitable and ungenerous. "Do either of you get dizzy easily?" he asked.

"Not a bit," Ollie assured him noisily. "We could stand on top of the Eyeful tower and it wouldn't make us bat a eye."

"Very well, come along," Jim had to hide his face over that "Eyeful" and he wondered if the Boome's had really seen the place.

IV

BOUND

As Jim took his seat before the controls of Her Highness his mind was busily trying to find some reason for his suspicion of the two self-invited passengers that he had promised to carry as far as the Gordon ranch at the end of Cap Rock. The only plausible idea presenting itself was the fact that Mrs. Boome and Ollie were en route to the home of the men who seemed so anxious to interfere in the affairs of the Box-Z. Although up to the hour of their meeting with the dignified Don, the boy's real knowledge of the owner of the Haurea place had been mostly hearsay and vague, both he and his younger step-brother's confidence had been given whole heartedly to the descendant of an ancient race, so anything said or done that looked hostile toward their new friend made the boy's hair bristle.

Drawing on his glove, Jim's eyes rested a second on the green emerald he wore and for an instant he wondered if that had any-

thing to do with the woman's desire to take the trip with him, but he couldn't see how. Anyway, it did give him another train of thought. Perhaps the pair were not as ignorant as they pretended to be regarding flying and it occurred to him that they might be preparing to carry out some plan against himself. He determined to be on the alert and give them no chance to get the better of him. With that in mind he adjusted the mirror so that he could get a full view of Mrs. Boome in the back seat, then he took another precaution.

"Those buckles sometime get in the way," he remarked, and pulled the main strap which secured Ollie to his seat, drew the clasp well around under the fellow's right arm. That would make it awkward for the man to get himself loose.

"Thanks," Ollie smiled cheerfully. "Is it safe?"

"I suppose so," Jim said indifferently, then added, "Let me see." He ran his fingers along the wide leather belt. "Better have it a little tighter, especially if this is your first flight. It will hold you fast. Slipping around in the seat isn't comfortable." He made the

safety-belt two notches shorter, then felt satisfied that he had done all he could to protect himself.

"This will be a great experience for the old woman. She'll talk about it the rest of her life," Ollie chatted.

"If you are inclined to get dizzy, look up and not over the sides," Jim advised.

"It's a great day," Ollie's eyes traveled toward the blue dome of heaven as if confident that the weather would be favorable for them.

"Pretty bumpy though," Jim replied. "You never can tell by the color of the sky what the air is doing. Rather played the dickens when I was coming here, and going back I'll have to buck the worst of it, but you needn't be afraid, you'll be all right."

"Oh sure—" The remark was cut off by the roar of the engine as Jim opened the throttle and let her go. Her Highness, instead of racing smoothly as usual gave a series of jumps and jerks before leaving the ground, then wobbled her way laboriously as she zoomed three thousand feet. Out of a corner of his eye, Jim observed the man beside him and was gratified to note that he

ducked his head below the wind-shield and his face paled. The boy hoped the fellow was not going to be sick, but he didn't care much. In the mirror he could see the smile fade from Mrs. Boome's face and she grabbed the sides of the cock-pit in terror that was evidently not feigned. Up they shot five-hundred feet more, then Jim leveled off, and set the course for Crofton. His lack of confidence in his passengers did not lessen and whenever he saw one of them sitting more at ease, he let Her Highness play a trick or two. She banked, skipped, dropped, and whirled not unlike a bucking bronc, and once the boy shut the engine off, letting her spin. The plane thoroughly enjoyed the maneuvers, but the Boomes didn't. There wasn't a bit of color in either of their faces when Crofton came into view, and Jim was wondering anxiously what he could do with them while he had to go to the freight depot and the general store. It occurred to him that if he left them they might get away with his bus. Finally the machine came to rest near the railroad and the young fellow glanced at Ollie.

"How do you like it?" he asked soberly.

"Oh, oh, it's a g-great experience," Ollie assured him weakly.

"Sorry I'll have to ask you both to get out. I'm doing some shopping for the house and shall need to pack the stuff in. Anyway, it will give you a chance to stretch your legs and get your wind," he remarked.

"All right," Ollie agreed readily, then added. "Maybe we better telephone the Gordons not to send the car for us."

"Well, I'll wait for you," Jim promised. He found that Mrs. Boome was as eager as her son to rest before going on, and the woman seemed to have lost her tongue somewhere up there in the sky. She shivered and wobbled weakly as Ollie helped her to the ground.

"Marvelous way to travel," the man declared loudly but there was no real enthusiasm in his words. His mother merely nodded.

"I'll run along." Jim sprinted toward the depot while the pair started to walk as if they were intoxicated toward the main street. It took only a moment to get the freight, and then Jim had another idea. "Wish you'd take it to my plane, Bill, and

hang around until I get back," he said to the husky agent-assistant.

"Sure. I'll run it over on the hand truck," the man promised, "and wait for you."

"Thanks." The boy was off like a shot, and although his list was rather a long one, he managed to get all of the items together in record time. He saw his passengers in the hotel office as he hurried by with his arms full of purchases.

"Starting soon?" Ollie called.

"All ready," Jim replied. He was disappointed that the pair had not made up their minds to wait for the Gordon car. He reached the plane and found Bill astride the fuselage.

"Great old machine," the big fellow grinned.

"You bet. I'll give you a ride some time, if you'd like one."

"Like one—gee, Kid, I'd give my eye teeth for a ride—say, who are the guys—" He did not finish the sentence for the Boomes were coming and he thought they might overhear him.

"Woman's name is Boome—she used to

work for my father," Jim whispered. "The man is her son."

"The Boomes—what the heck they coming back for?"

"Search me. I'm taking them to the Gordons. Well, here you are." The boy turned to the couple who were now almost at his elbow, while Bill slipped from his seat.

"Need any help to take off, Jim?" he asked.

"Glad to have you wait," Jim answered. It took only a few minutes to get ready for the last lap of the journey. "All O. K.?" he called to Bill and that man's jovial face was unusually sober as he nodded. Her Highness raced past him, lifted, and soared at top speed toward the rim of Cap Rock, which, half an hour later stood out like the uneven teeth of a buzz-saw against the horizon. In spite of his suspicions the Boomes had made no wrong move, but Jim wasn't rid of them yet. It might be some sort of trap was ready to be sprung at the landing place, so the boy decided to avoid it if possible. He selected a wide ledge above the ranch houses, shut off the engines and glided steeply. Below he could see several men, some on horseback,

two in a high-powered car and half a dozen just watching intently. The moment the plane stopped, the boy gave a hand to the man beside him, and Ollie freed himself from his straps, got out and proceeded to help his mother. All the while Jim kept his eyes on the men who had seen him land. He noted that the car was coming toward the ledge and realized with satisfaction that it would take minutes for them to reach his level.

"T-thank you, Jim. I-I'll be over to see your paw," Mrs. Boome promised when at last she was safe on the ground.

"I'll tell him," Jim promised, then, without waiting an instant longer he opened the throttle, swept forward, lifted lightly, and with a sigh of relief that his fear had been groundless, he soared toward home. At least the unwelcome passengers had done no damage, but the boy's suspicions of them did not lessen. Finally he was safe and sound on the ground near the home of the K-A, and one of the men came to help him carry the packages to the house. Mr. and Mrs. Austin were there, and they smiled a welcome.

"Do everything, Old Timer?"

"Yes sir. Hope it's all right."

"I am sure it is, Jim. You are a good messenger," Mrs. Austin replied.

"I say, Dad, remember Lilly Boome?"

"Lilly Boome? Oh, why yes, what about her? She wasn't much good but we used to have her come in to clean us up sometimes and do a bit of cooking."

"You ought to see her now—and her son—"

"Son—I didn't know that she had a son," the elder Austin remarked.

"Well she has. He's not a young fellow, I think he looks about thirty."

"What do you know about them?"

"Met them in the hall of records and they wished themselves on me. Just dropped them at the Gordon's," the boy explained, then went on with the account of the odd couple.

"That is strange, but I don't know that I'm particularly anxious to have the woman, or the pair of them, calling here. I do not recall the son, but she must have had one. It seems to me that she disappeared from this neighborhood and later I heard that she

went off with some fellow who used to hang around the hotel at Crofton, but I don't know anything about it, was not interested enough to inquire."

"They're a queer looking pair. You ought to see them just out of curiosity, Dad," Jim grinned.

"Reckon my bump of curiosity has never developed along that line. It is rather strange that they should be intimate with the Gordons, but I suppose one does make odd friendships on those tours. Now, I have some letters to write, my son. Thank you for your help this morning."

"You're welcome, Dad. Anything else?"

"Not a thing." The man went into the house and to the room set apart for his "office" while the boy went in search for a belated luncheon. Mrs. Austin followed to see that he got plenty; not that he wasn't perfectly capable of attending to his own needs.

"Did you hear from Bob?"

"He didn't telephone," Mrs. Austin answered as she looked to see that the food was hot.

"Then I guess he doesn't want me to help

him. He said he'd call up if he did." Jim devoted his entire attention to the meal, and finally it was finished.

"I thought you expected to work on your radio so that you can test it out tonight," Mrs. Austin remarked.

"That's what we planned, and I guess I'll get on the job. That grub went right to the spot and filled in a long felt want. Thank you, Mom. I feel as if I've been made over." Mrs. Austin chuckled.

"You must feel made over about three times a day, you two boys—"

"Three times," Jim laughed. "When we're at home we manage to tuck away five meals a day, and sometimes an extra one at night, especially when we're working on the radio."

"Then I expect I'd better see that the cooler is re-enforced for tonight's attack."

"Atta Scout—Be prepared."

He hurried up to the long low room at the top of the house where he and Bob reigned supreme and no one ventured within the sacred precinct without special invitation, not even to clean. But the "lab" was orderly—at least it was to the boys who worked there. They knew exactly where to

find every item from the largest to the smallest part of their equipment. Occasionally Mrs. Austin looked at it a bit askance but she didn't interfere. That was one of the many reasons for her great popularity with the men folk of her family. Today Jim glanced about, his eyes rested on the tiny radio set, but he did not take his place at the bench. Instead, he stared out of the window over the long miles toward Pearl River and his thoughts went to his step-brother who was somewhere on the Cross-Bar ranch.

"Wonder if I ought to go there now?" he asked himself uneasily. For a minute he hesitated. Bob had promised to telephone if he needed further help, so it seemed foolhardy to go unless the younger boy called for him. They were both anxious to experiment with the little radio. It was one they were building to install in Her Highness, and if their theories were correct, it would do considerable more than the ordinary instrument. "Don't be a goop." Jim took off his coat and set to work, but his brain wasn't entirely in the task before him and he was glad when at last he heard the supper bell ringing.

"The kid will say I've been loafing on the job," he remarked as he took off the head set and glanced at the records he had been making. "I'll get an early start." He hustled about to get ready for the meal, and later, when he had finished, he asked to be excused.

"Hop along," his dad consented, and Jim did several hops. The first was into his flying suit, the second into the cock-pit of Her Highness, and the third, was with the bus into the air. That was the most important one. At that time of year the evenings were long around Cap Rock so the boy expected that he would be back with Bob before dark. Not that it mattered, but it would give them more hours in the "lab."

"Go to it, old girl," he laughed as he zoomed swiftly at racing speed until he was three thousand feet, then he leveled off, set the course, and shot forward. He could see Pearl River, the setting sun making it look like a narrow stripe of rainbow far ahead. The distance to the old Caldwell ranch house was twenty-two miles, so Her Highness had hardly climbed into the sky before she began to glide to earth. Jim decided to stop there because he calculated that the evening meal

might not be over so early and Bob would still be around, or not far away. He came down in a perfect three-point landing, rolled along a bit further to speak with one of the cowboys who was leaning against the old bunkhouse.

"Looking for Bob?" the chap called.

"Yes. Is he around?"

"Not yet. He finished up early and rode over to look at the dam before supper. We're through, most of us, but his is waiting for him."

"I'll go fetch him," Jim replied. "Did he go alone?"

"Yes. Your Dad and Mrs. Austin examined the place a few days ago, so Bob was just going to see what he thinks about it, I told him something should be done soon. If we get one of those rains or floods that's hitting the rest of the country, that old masonry will go faster than a streak. She can't stand much extra pressure. He ought to be back though by now. He's had plenty of time."

"Perhaps he rode on to the river to turn some of the water down stream just to be on the safe side. It doesn't look much like

rain or floods now, but Dad told him it wasn't safe," Jim explained.

"Sure, I know. Well, you won't have no trouble finding him from that saddle," the fellow grinned and Jim laughed.

"I won't."

He opened the throttle and the huge bird took to the air as easily and as gracefully as an eagle. Several of the men came out to have a close look at her and they whooped as the engine roared into the sky. Jim waved, waggled the wings, and then laughed at nothing at all. "Can do almost anything with you, old girl," he declared encouragingly, and whether the old girl understood or not, she proceeded to climb and curve about in the long rays of the setting sun. The young pilot started at once in the direction of the river, and although he circled several times over the vicinity he did not catch a glimpse of Caldwell.

"He must be at the dam." Her Highness soared on at a comfortable speed, and in two minutes the boy could see the wall which was so old that parts of it were thick with small trees and shrubs. The water came less than half way to the top, and in two places

some of it dropped into a well-worn bed below. Near the dam, cliffs rose in smooth tiers on both sides, but there were a number of trails, some man-made and some cattle-made, which descended to the lowest grade in a zig-zag track.

Jim's eyes searched the paths Bob would be likely to take, but the lad was nowhere in sight, then he began to look for the horse which must be grazing somewhere about. At last he saw the beast standing, reins hanging, but he wasn't eating. Assured that his step-brother was not far away, Jim spiraled in sharp circles, his eyes searching for a grinning face and a waving hat. Bob would certainly know of Her Highness' arrival and after two fruitless minutes, Jim scowled anxiously.

"Gosh, I wish I'd come over this afternoon," he grumbled. He glided lower but didn't want to select a landing place until he located Bob, then he thought possibly the younger boy was playing a trick on him. "That's it. He's showing me that he can hide from the eyes in the sky. Well, Old Timer, I'll fool you." He got out the glasses and began a thorough search, examining

every bit of shrubbery, rock, tree, underbrush, and hillock. He was about to give up and come down to let Bob know that he had won, then into his vision popped an odd mark on the ground. Looking at it more carefully, Jim made out that it looked as if something had been dragged along the sandy spot. He followed the line with his eyes. It led toward the edge of the cliff where it stopped.

"Something's been shoved over," he said dully and tried hard to believe that his stepbrother had dropped a log down, but he knew perfectly well that nothing of the sort had happened. Cautiously he tried to see to the bottom of the river bed, but the thick brush prevented him, besides the sun had disappeared and long shadows darkened that side of the wall. Then the boy turned Her Highness' nose into the air, climbed swiftly, circled and again searched the vicinity. He couldn't see a sign of anyone. It looked as if that part of the world was deserted. There wasn't a thing in sight but the restless horse, and at that moment the animal threw up his head, gave a jerk, then turned tail and ran as fast as his legs could

carry him toward the Caldwell house.

'We'll go down, Old Girl," the boy announced grimly, and in two minutes the wheels of the plane touched the ground. Her Highness rolled and stopped near where the bronc had been standing. Slipping out of the safety strap was the work of a second or less, then grabbing his rope, which no Texas boy would be without, Jim raced toward the rim of the cliff, following the trail he had discovered. As he went, any idea that it might have been made by a log was dispelled. At the edge of the cliff the boy stopped, then got down on his stomach to look over.

"Bob," he called, but no answer came, not even the faintest one. The only sound in the world was the soft lap of the water against the dam and a faint breeze which stirred in the few trees some rods away. The silence of the place was uncanny, and Jim wished that for company's sake he had left the engine running. Quickly his eyes went from one point to another, then at last he saw a very slight movement, it was barely perceptible, but he saw it and his heart leaped. At least Bob hadn't been killed.

Jim jumped to his feet, and started to run down the path, and in a moment he was standing about three rods from the wall of the dam and less distance from the stream that was allowed to escape. "Great Guns, Bob—" The younger boy was lying bound and gagged. Young Caldwell's eyes were wide open and he tried to move his head, but couldn't.

"Just a minute, Old Timer." Jim was on his knees, with one hand he fished through his pockets for his knife, while with the other he prepared to release the victim.

"We ben waiting fer you fer quite a spell, young feller." The voice was harsh and Jim sprang to his feet, whirled about, but his body seemed to shoot into a coiling loop which dropped over his shoulders, snapped tight, and circled him so swiftly that he was thrown to the ground beside the helpless Bob, who uttered an agonized groan.

V

AND GAGGED

"Yes, we ben waitin' fer you quite a spell. I told Caldwell that if he didn't move so's you'd spot him, I'd fill you full of lead and let you tumble down on him."

"I say, you—"

"You ain't sayin' nothin, young feller. You think you're a right smart piece o' goods, don't you, now. Well, I jest proved to you that I'm a cowboy, didn't I, and I am. Was a cowboy when you kept your pants up with a safety pin." With these few remarks, the fellow stuffed a rag in Jim's mouth and made him fast to a young tree. To add insult to injury, he finished the job with Austin's own rope, then seated himself near by and taking out a long black cigar, he lighted it leisurely, his eyes on his victims the while.

There was no mistaking the fellow! It was Dyke, the chap who had been Burnam's companion when they sought for Corso and his nephew in Vermont; and Johnson, as he

applied for work on the K-A ranch. Jim watched him anxiously and wondered if the attack had been made on them merely because of his father's refusal to give the man employment or if there was something more back of it, some deeper reason. He glanced down at his step-brother who was lying on his back, his hands behind him, his feet secured to an upright rock, and the thongs which bound the upper part of his body held him fast to a low clump of shrubbery that had partially concealed him from view above. He noticed that Bob's eyes were on Dyke's hands, and then Jim noted that a green emerald ring adorned the fellow's little finger.

As Bob's hands were beneath him, Jim could not be sure that the ring was the one his brother owned, but he had no difficulty believing that it was. Dyke leered at him craftily and gestured so the ornament could be easily seen.

"Your pal there insisted on me taking this as a momento," he announced, "En I'll be relievin' you of yours before I continue on my travels. These rings are helpful fer my business en I gotta pal that kin use one

of 'em right profitably," he announced. His cigar went out, so he lighted it again, smoked it furiously for several minutes, apparently quite indifferent to the passage of time. Jim wondered what was to be done with them but he had a hunch that whatever it was would be deferred until after dark, so, as the night was settling, they would not have to wait very long to know the worst. At last Dyke drew a gun from his pocket and pointed it at Bob's head.

"Listen young feller, this is loaded to the gills, don't take no chances that it ain't, er I'm foolin', see. I want some information out o' you, I want it quick and I want it true. Get that. I put the same up to your buddy here en he answered me. Now, I'm askin' you, en ef you ain't answerin' the same, the kid gits blowed to blazes pronto, en you git sent 'long after him soon's I'm all set. See?"

Jim nodded as best he could and his heart almost stood still while he tried to think of what the question would consist. Dyke's face was scowling blackly, there wasn't a tremor in his hand as he held the gun, his finger ready to spring the trigger. Austin

set his lips grimly and waited for the fellow to go on.

"I'm taking that gag out o' your mouth en I'll give you a drink out o' the creek so you'll know it ain't poisoned. Then you tell me what I'm aimin' to know. You'll save yourself a lot of trouble if you answer up smart, like you're the head o' the class, en ef you do any yellin', I'll empty the gat into both o' you."

Jim nodded again that he understood and although his mind was working at trip-hammer speed, he could not think up the smallest solution to their difficulties. Dyke surveyed the ropes which bound his second victim, then took the precaution to fasten an end of the one about his feet to a stump, so there was no possible chance for the young fellow to swing them around and trip up the gangman. Satisfied at last, the man took a telescope cup from his pocket, adjusted it, filled it to the brim, using one hand and keeping his eyes on the boys, who couldn't budge no matter how much they wanted to; nor did they try.

"Now, swallow this." He slipped the rag from Jim's mouth and held the cup to his

lips, which were mighty dry. The cool water made his throat easier, and he sighed with physical relief. "Now, I'm askin' you them questions." The cup was put aside and the fellow took his position. "Where did you take that kid and the big fellow with him after we went across the border?" he snapped.

"Gave them a lift over the lake to the New York side," Jim replied honestly enough.

"Yeah. Where did you drop them?" was the next question.

"By a road—"

"What road—"

"I don't know. We didn't have much time and I didn't notice the map. Just got them across Lake Champlain and dropped them. It wasn't far from one of the small towns up there, but if you blow us both to blazes, I can't tell you more than that," Jim declared and Dyke scowled. Finally he glanced at Bob, and although he lowered the gun, he did not put it back in his pocket.

"What do you know about them guys?" Dyke demanded suddenly.

"Not a blamed thing except they were

farmers working on the Fenton place. I don't know any more than that. Only saw them a few times while we were there."

"Did you ever go to their shack?"

"No, we didn't. I heard Mr. Fenton say they had one but if I ever saw it, I didn't know who lived in it." So far the questions had not been hard to answer, nor was there any information in the answers that would lead Dyke to Corso or Don Haurea.

"How long were they workin' fer the Fentons?"

"How the blazes do you expect me to know? Think we were asking the family for the account books. We were only there a short time," Jim snapped.

"Yeah. Well, you'se friendly 'nough to take them across the lake," Dyke snarled.

"We spent a day and a half picking up people who were stranded by the water—there were hundreds of them, and we didn't do any more for one bunch than for another." Jim was thanking his lucky star that the questioner was not more astute, then Dyke gave him a kick.

"Didn't you? Well, you sent me en Burnam off to Canada," he growled savagely.

"He asked about a couple of fishermen, a man and his nephew. You heard what Burnam said as well as we did. He didn't say a word about working people; he said the couple he was interested in were dark and that they came up there to fish. I never saw this pair with so much as a trawler," he retorted convincingly. Dyke growled and the boy went on. "There were a lot of people coming that far then going on to Canada where the game laws are easier. Mrs. Fenton told us that when we first got there."

"You let him think you belonged there—"

"I didn't have anything to do with what he thought," Jim replied hotly. "If he couldn't tell a Texan from a Vermonter that isn't my fault, is it?"

"Burnam's a damned fool," Dyke thundered.

"You ought to know. Why didn't you kick him in the shins when he bawled you out?"

"Yeah. Well, I'm doin' more than kick him in the shins, young feller. He's in fer a trimmin' from me that'll send him galley west en back," Dyke flared passionately.

"I wish you luck. He's a hot-tamale all right and if I was doing a job with him, I'd

keep a spotter on his trail." Jim suddenly remembered that Bob's horse had started for home. It was possible, if he could keep this fellow talking long enough some of the cowmen would see the riderless bronc and come out in force to find the boys. It was known at both ranches that they would be near the dam so the men would not waste any time in a search.

"What do you know about him?" Dyke demanded.

"Not much except little things I heard here and there. My brother and I had quite a trip about the country," Jim answered vaguely.

"What did you hear about Burnam?" Dyke asked in an uneasy tone.

"We picked up some bits in the north—"

"Canada?"

"I'll tell the knock-kneed world—"

"Well, it beat me how the Mounties knew we were coming," Dyke remarked.

"Did it?" Jim asked innocently. He could have told Dyke that he had telephoned Allen Ruhel, the chief in Quebec, but he wisely decided to withhold that information.

"Blast it all, they were waiting fer us en

I beat it. Wasn't taking no chances of being mugged up there," he volunteered.

"Wise chap," Jim answered.

"You bet I'm wise," Dyke declared emphatically. "They ain't layin' no traps fer me. This country is big enough fer me to work in—I'm satisfied here—" He broke off sharply as if realizing that the discussion was getting him nowhere. "Now you shut your face. I ain't got no time to waste gabbin' with you."

He forced the gag back in Jim's mouth, glanced about through the gathering gloom, then crawling under the bushes he began to fumble for something. Jim could no longer watch his movements, but the boy's eyes sought his step-brother's. At least their replies to the questions must have agreed and that was a comfort. Probably Bob had answered with merely the chief facts and had left out details. Just now the young fellow's eyes were closed and Jim wondered uneasily if he had fainted or lost consciousness. With an effort he managed to grunt a couple of times, then Bob looked at him, stirred a bit, but that was as much signaling as they could accomplish.

In about a minute Dyke crawled quietly out, holding something that looked like a long can, which he took from its wrappings. The man placed it gingerly on the ground then proceeded to fish through his pockets. He produced Bob's watch and placed it on Jim's knees. Then he poked his ugly face into the boy's and sneered evilly.

"Maybe you guessed what I'm going to do en maybe you ain't, but you keep watch en you'll find out in a minute." He took the can and creeping stealthily toward the wall of the dam he selected a spot and quickly scooped out the soft earth. That done he placed the thing in it, did something to the exposed end, examined his work carefully, then turned about with a wicked grin.

"This here's a cracker-jack time bomb. It'll be goin' off in ten minutes. You can count 'em fer amusement. Ten minutes will be 'nough fer me to get up there and make a nice get-away in your plane. I was a sure enough cowboy in my youth, an a hellion war pilot during our late unpleasantness. A plane o' my own pleases my fancy. You'll go to blazes together with the explosion, the wall o' the dam will come tumblin' down

en spill water all over you, en dirt en rocks, so if they ever find a piece o' you they won't be able to tell it from a chicken bone."

He stood fully a minute quietly staring at his victims, his lips parted in a smile, and his eyes narrow. The stillness in that short space of time was intense, and into Jim's agonized mind flashed the horror of the next nine they must live through before the bomb exploded and released them from their suffering. The boy had a vague idea that he heard a sound from somewhere above them, but it was more like the whir of an eagle's wings than the thud of hoofs racing to their rescue.

Anxiously Jim listened, then, giving up all hope that the cowboys would arrive in time to save them from being blown to atoms, he struggled furiously with his bonds, but Dyke had done a first class job of knotting and the ropes did not yield the smallest fraction.

"Well, ta-ta. Give my regards to St. Peter when you get there, and be sure to tell him I'm a real cowboy."

Dyke waved, then springing into the narrow trail which would take him to the top

of the cliff, he leaped from rock to rock in the ascent. Jim's eyes followed him and he wished madly that he had done something to Her Highness before leaving her, so that this fellow would be dashed back into the death trap he had set. The watch on his knee had ticked off nearly half a minute and again he struggled to free himself, but the effort only made the ropes cut unmercifully into his body, so with a hopeless sob he gave up, contenting himself with waiting for the end. His eyes rested a moment on Bob and now he hoped the young fellow was unconscious. Bob had kept so quiet that Jim was sure he must be badly hurt.

To Austin's ears came the sound of Dyke's feet as he rushed along, scattering gravel and small stones with every jump, then suddenly the boy was conscious of a cessation of the sound. It was like being in the air and shutting the motor off. The silence was as emphasized as the noise to which he had been listening. He glanced toward the cliff and saw the man pause in the act of taking a step. The upper part of his body was bent forward at a sharp angle, his neck was stretched to its fullest extent and his chin

poked out, while his right hand was extended in the act of balancing himself.

"Perhaps he hears someone coming." As the thought popped into his mind, Jim strained his ears to catch the sound, then he moaned to attract Bob's attention. Finally Caldwell opened his eyes. By staring at the statue-like figure he made his step-brother understand. Both of them listened and watched, but neither could distinguish a thing. It was so quiet that the ticking of the watch came to them clearly. Somewhere in the distance a bird chirped sleepily and from far away came the faint moo of a cow calling her calf, but not a jingle of spur or bridle; yet Dyke continued to stand in that same position. He might have been carved out of the soft stone under his feet. The seconds ticked off unheeded.

"What the heck is the matter with him? He'll be pulled into this if he doesn't get a move on," Jim thought. A moment more and he saw Dyke's head move slightly so that his profile was clear, and to the boy's unutterable astonishment, the fellow's features seemed to be doing a sort of contortion. His eye protruded and the extended fist

clenched as he must have realized the extreme danger to which the delay was exposing him, but he did not move an inch upward.

Five of the precious minutes had passed and the unexplainable mystery of the bandit's actions made the boys almost forget their own predicament, then a swish, a thump of something hitting the earth near by with a wide slap, and a sharp sizzle made both of them glance quickly in the direction of the sound. It was where the bomb was set and to the young fellow's great joy, the ground about it was saturated with water. Instantly there came a second swish and a bucket full of water rendered the destructive can useless. Before Jim could ascertain who had come to save them, the air was split with a shrill shriek.

"Let me go! Let me go!" It was Dyke, who had hardly budged. There wasn't anyone near him, and for a second it occurred to Jim that he might have stepped into a bear trap, but that could not be the answer. Even if his foot were caught in the iron jaws, he would have struggled to free himself instead of standing as if he were paralyzed. "Let me

go—" It was an agonized wail, high-pitched and piercing, then the fellow dropped in a heap and lay motionless, while Jim and Bob stared in fascinated wonder.

"It is well." A soft step from the creek and a tall figure leaned over Jim. Immediately the sharp point of a knife slipped under the rope, then a dark hand removed the gag.

"Oh, thank you—" The man went to Bob and soon the two were free, but they were so sore and stiff they could hardly move. Their rescuer stepped to the bomb, examined it carefully, then threw it carelessly into the creek.

"Gosh Zargo—" Bob found his voice first, but that was all he could say.

"You are injured?" Zargo came to his side and helped him sit up.

"A bit banged. Are you dead, Jim?"

"You can search me," Jim invited. "If I'm not dead, I'm dreaming." He began to rub his arms and legs and gave a sharp whistle as the blood tingled like a thousand pins and needles through his body. He filled his lungs, then whistled.

"If you can walk, we'd better go," Zargo

reminded them. He slipped an arm about each lad and helped them forward. He seemed to be making no effort whatever and they were both amazed at his strength, for he almost carried them to the path and started up as if he had no greater burden than a pair of kittens. When they reached Dyke, he stopped, set his toe under the fellow and turned him over.

"What on earth happened to him?" Jim gasped.

"Flying hearses, I never saw such a thing," Bob added.

"He was frightened to death," Zargo replied.

"Frightened to death?"

"That is all. As he climbed, suddenly his body feel helpless. He knows in a few minutes he will be in the middle of chaos, so, being a coward in his heart, he die of his fears. We will leave him." However, Zargo did wait to remove the emerald ring and restore it to Bob. "In his haste, he forget to appropriate yours. Has he anything else?"

"Nothing of mine but the watch—"

"I have that," Jim explained and handed it over to his step-brother.

"Let us proceed. He can do no further harm." By that time the boys felt considerably less helpless, so they climbed unaided to the top of the cliff. A short distance away they saw Her Highness waiting in the shadows, and hurried to the plane, where they stopped to catch their breath.

"Have you a horse, or anything?" Jim asked.

"No," Zargo told them.

"Then let us take you home," the boy urged.

"It will be kind," he accepted. Just then they heard the sharp click of racing hoofs, and in a moment one of the ranchmen burst into view.

"That you, Caldwell?" he shouted.

"We're both here and all right."

"Thank goodness for that. Your bronc came trotting in a little while ago so we started after you. What did he do, just run off?" The ranchman was beside them now and his companions came tearing in his wake.

"Yes. I let the reins hang and I guess he got hungry," Bob answered.

"We brought him along, but I suppose you'll go in the plane." The man showed that

he was puzzled and he scowled at the three of them.

"Yes. I wish, when you get back to the house that you would telephone Mom and tell her we'll be along later. We won't be long."

"Very well." The rider sat hesitating, then blurted out. "I say, Bob, this looks queer to me. Sure that you are all O. K.? Need us to hang around?" His glance fell on Zargo, and both boys grinned reassuringly.

"You needn't be afraid of him, old man. He did us a mighty good turn, so we're just going to give him a lift as far as the Box-Z. We'll do that and be at home almost as soon as you can ride back. Thanks a lot for coming."

"Well, O. K. Glad we didn't find you in sections and have to take you back in a sack. So long." They whirled about and the three climbed into the cock-pits, Zargo to the seat in front.

"I can pilot enough to get us home if you do not feel equal," he said quietly. "Your hands must be sore and your body ache."

"Glad to have you," Jim agreed without hesitation. He remembered that Don Haurea had said that his man was not a pilot,

but somehow the boy felt that their rescuer would not have made the offer if he did not know how to manage. The experience with Dyke had left Jim feeling as if he had been run through a stone crusher and he was relieved that the chap could handle the controls.

"It is well that you did not speak of Dyke to the ranchmen. I wish to report the story to Don Haurea before anything is spread abroad," he remarked as he took his place.

"Guess that must have been in Bob's mind. When he didn't speak of it, I held my tongue," Jim answered. "We certainly owe you—" The engine cut off any further thanks and as Her Highness bellowed into the air, Jim realized that the pilot knew his controls, for he handled them only as an expert can. The plane responded swiftly to every touch and presently taxied gracefully into the pecan grove, where the boys saw Don Haurea standing, as if he had expected them.

"It is well?" was his greeting and his eyes seemed to take in the whole plane as well as her passengers in one all-inclusive glance.

"Well!" Zargo replied, and as he got out

of the cock-pit he addressed the man in that strange tongue the boys did not understand. The words seemed to flow from his lips in short sentences to which his employer paid strictest attention. When it came to an end, he answered briefly, then turned to the young fellows.

"Suffering soup-bones, Don Haurea, we would have been—" Bob began.

"What you would have been is not so important," the Don smiled. "That your bodies are bruised and sore is a present fact. Come into the house and permit me to make you comfortable. Do not be anxious about your family. I shall telephone and tell Mrs. Austin that it will give me great pleasure to have your company for an hour or so. She need not worry." Without waiting for a reply he led the way straight to the room in which the boys had cleaned up the day of their arrival from Vermont.

"You are mighty thoughtful," Jim managed to say.

"I am merely humane. Now, strip yourselves of your clothes and permit my man, he is an expert, to look after you. Do not be shy. He will fix you so in a brief time you

will forget the discomfort. Then you shall dine with me and we shall talk. There are a few things I should like to know."

He spoke a few words to the servant, who was a huge chap, wearing a thin white suit, and soft shoes. He nodded understandingly, and the boys prepared for the treatment, whatever it was to be. As far as they could describe it when they were dressed again, it had been a series of baths, mostly warm, being rubbed with some kind of ointment, then with another, and finally they had been rolled in great towels. While they rested luxuriously, he prepared them each a drink, and after the first sip, they swallowed the balance without hesitation.

"Oh boy, that goes right to the spot," Bob declared.

"It sure does take the kinks out. I feel like a Sampson—"

"Well, don't be such a goop as that old guy was," Caldwell advised.

"Go on, when I need a hair cut I'll go to a regular barber."

"Now, it is for you to dress," the man invited. "You are better?"

"We're top hole," Bob assured him.

VI

HEIRS

"Now we can discuss what you would have done," Don Haurea announced. The three were seated at dinner and although Jim had eaten his supper before he left the K-A, he felt as if he had at least one empty leg, while Bob had unblushingly admitted that he was hollow as a drum all over. "Tell us, do please, how you happened to be strung in such an undignified fashion to the underbrush."

"That won't take long," Bob answered. "Jim went to Laville this morning and I rode to the Cross-Bar to help out and late in the afternoon I went to have a look at the old dam. Dad and Mom think it should be rebuilt so it is absolutely safe in case unusual pressure is put on it, or else the water should be turned back into the main stream of Pearl River. Whichever is done will effect you somewhat so we were going to talk the matter over with you as soon as we could."

"Yes. I should be glad to know what action is taken," the Don nodded.

"Well, I didn't expect to go until after supper, but I finished early, so went right along. I didn't see a sign of anyone, or hear a sound that was out of the ordinary, but when I was walking toward the wall—the section that goes across, I heard a rope come sailing, and the next thing I knew I was being snaked good and proper along the ground and into the gully, then I was tied up like a chicken and this fellow Dyke was standing over me. He jabbed a gag into my mouth and finished the job of fixing me hand and foot. After that, he kept his gun jabbed in my ribs, took out the silencer, and asked questions. He wanted to know where Jim and I had taken Corso, and a lot of other things. He asked Jim the same questions later, only he asked me more. I was in some sweat you can bet for fear Jim would say something very different. To go back to my part, he saw the emerald ring and wanted to know where I got it and I told him that Corso had given it to me for taking him across Lake Champlain. I couldn't make out for sure if Dyke knew

anything about the real significance of the ring, but I guess he knew something. I didn't tell him any more than I could possibly help but I didn't dare say I'd found it, or anything like that because I didn't know how quickly he'd trip me up."

"Well, whatever he knew is quite safe now," the Don smiled.

"Jumping Jupiter, I'll say so. Well after he got all the information he thought he could he swore around because he couldn't get a job on the K-A, so I told him that if he'd come back with me I'd see that he did get one either there or on the Cross-Bar, but he wasn't letting me get away with anything like that. Jim had said that he'd come in the plane and pick me up and I knew that he'd be flying around soon, so I tried to stall the fellow for time. From the way he acted I made up my mind that whatever he planned to do he'd put off until after dark."

"That's what I figured," Jim put in.

"Finally I heard the motor and when Dyke realized what it was he pulled the brush up so that I couldn't be seen from the air. and he hid himself under a log." Bob

turned to his step-brother and went on, "then later, you stood on the edge of the cliff and shouted. Dyke pulled out his gun and told me to wriggle and attract your attention. I was tied so tight it was all I could do to move, and at first I wasn't going to do it, but he threatened to shoot you if I didn't. I shoved a bit and then you came tearing down and he caught you as he had me. I thought our geese were cooked for fair. I ached all over and for a while I went out like a light," the boy finished.

"Would you like fresh strawberry ice-cream or chocolate?" the Don asked.

"Strawberry," Bob decided promptly.

"A very sensible decision," the Don smiled quite as if his young guests had not been helpess and hopeless less than two hours earlier. "And you?"

"Strawberry," Jim grinned.

"You came along and were made fast to the small tree?"

"Yes sir." Jim told his part of the experience and the Don listened attentively to the recital. At the close the boy said, "Zargo told us that the fellow was scared to death, that he couldn't move. What happened to

him, he looked as if he'd been paralyzed and wow, how he did howl to be let go, but no one was near him!"

"But what struck him, he couldn't go fluey like that just at that particular moment?" Jim persisted.

"Perhaps it is a secret you will one day learn," Don Haurea replied. "I believe that when the body is discovered by the officers of the law, they will find on expert medical examination that the man, while climbing the steep cliff was seized with a heart attack—one with a weak heart should avoid steep cliffs especially in hot climates. Permit me to serve you with more ice cream, do please."

"Just a little," Jim agreed reluctantly. He wished that his capacity were greater, but the whole dinner had tasted delicious so two helpings of the dessert was all he could possibly manage. It was a handicap.

"We certainly were lucky that Zargo happened along when he did," Bob said earnestly. "We'd have been galley-west by now, that dam would have been blown to a sand pile and the water would have done no end of damage."

"All of that would truly have happened but for Zargo's timely arrival," the man admitted.

"How did he happen to discover us?" Jim asked.

"The particulars of that I did not get from him," Don Haurea answered soberly. "He evidently saw your danger, threw water on the bomb before it could go off—"

"Probably he'd have licked the stuffing out of Dyke if the fellow hadn't died—"

"That is something I think Zargo will regret all his life," the Don smiled. "To a man like my overseer, 'licking the stuffing' out of one like Dyke, would be a great satisfaction."

They finished the dessert and Jim sat looking at his host. In the back of his brain there was a sort of idea buzzing around but he couldn't quite get hold of it. He recalled the experience in the gully, every detail of it, even the sounds that had reached his keen ears and suddenly he remembered the odd whirr, like a bird, a large one, flying high.

"What was it Zargo did to Dyke, Don Haurea?" he asked softly.

"Did you see my man touch him?"

"Not until after he was dead."

"You have absolutely no suspicion or evidence that Zargo did anything more than you saw and understood?"

"I haven't any evidence," Jim answered, then went on carefully, "and the suspicion part doesn't quite fit. Bob and I are mighty grateful to him for everything he did, everything—but—"

"But?"

"Well, I'm interested to know more about it," Jim ended.

"Perhaps you shall some day. Have you any fear of Zargo?"

"Fear! Of course not."

"That is well. You need have none. My man servant, or overseer as he is called, would risk his life to save or even ease yours. A little later you must come and spend a day with us. I promised to show you some interesting experiments, and perhaps you will see something which will clear the matter for you. In the mean time, may I suggest, that in discussing what happened in the gully, you omit reference to the ring? The story can be told that you and your brother were attacked by Dyke because Mr.

Austin refused the man employment, that the man Dyke in getting away up the cliff, suddenly fell, and later you were released by my overseer, who was out fishing. Zargo is very fond of fishing and often goes beyond the dam and as far as the river."

"That suits us," Jim agreed heartily. "Gosh, I'd like to shake hands with him. We owe him a lot! He's mighty strong, you should have seen him lift us!"

"I'd like to have seen him take just one crack at Dyke," Bob added enthusiastically. "That would have been worth seeing."

"It would indeed but as matters stand it's a pleasure that you can never enjoy. However, Zargo is quite a wrestler, you may have an opportunity to watch him perform some day. I have yet to meet the man who can stand up to him long," the Don told them.

As they talked, Jim noticed that the lights in the room, which were a soft yellow were changing and in a minute they were glowing a bright pink. He thought it was a fancy of his host to have them different but he wondered just how it was accomplished for as far as he could make out, each globe had only one bulb, which was crusted white, and

there did not seem to be space for extra colored glass, if that was the way it was managed. He was going to ask Don Haurea about it, but when he looked at the man, he was leaning back in an attitude of listening. In the course of the next two minutes the lights changed to dull blue, then to a pale green.

"I seem to be having other callers," the Don said quietly and his face wore a puzzled expression.

"We'll hop along home," Bob said quickly.

"Don't do that, my dear boy. I rather wish that you would wait, but you will excuse me I am sure if I draw the portiers between this room and the next," he told them. "I'd suggest that you keep your presence here a secret from my guests, unless I send one of the servants to you."

"All right," Bob took his seat again, and their host pointed to a shelf.

"There are some books if you care to look at them." Just then the serving man entered.

"A car, Master, and three people, strangers! Two are men and one is a woman."

"Thank you." The servant disappeared, and a moment later they heard the grinding

of brakes as a limousine stopped near the veranda. The next instant the voice of the servant came to them indistinctly. Jim saw the Don press a button at the side of his chair, and immediately the voices were amplified and were as loud as if they were in the room.

"Don Haurea is dining—"

"Well, my good man, we're glad of that, but tell him we have come a great many miles tonight and it's important that we see him at once." The voice was suave, but not particularly pleasant.

"I shall tell him—"

"We're coming right in," was the next announcement spoken emphatically, then the three in the dining room heard the noise of the late arrivals stepping quickly to the ground, on to the veranda, toward the door and into the reception room.

"Pardon me." The Don rose, drew the heavy curtains and disappeared behind them, while Bob went to have a look at one of the books. By that time Jim saw that the lights were burning yellow again. He was mighty puzzled and glanced at the chair that had just been vacated.

"I say, Bob, did you notice the lights in here change color?" Bob looked at him, then glanced at the bulbs.

"Change color! Why they are just the same as when we came in. I noticed them then because they were such a good shade of yellow,' he answered softly. "You're going nuts."

"I am not," Jim retorted.

"Well, say, maybe that guy this afternoon hurt your head—"

"He didn't," Jim answered. "Go on and read your book."

"I'm going to. Say, it's about soil and chemicals—"

"Well keep still and see what's in it, you ground lubber," Jim whispered and his step-brother lost no time in obeying.

But the mystery of the lights and the button which had megaphoned the voices of the unexpected guests was something that gripped Jim's imagination and he began to study the side of the chair. This occupied his immediate attention, then suddenly he stood up straight and listened intently, forgetting for the moment that a gentleman is never an eavesdropper. He recognized that

bellowing voice in the next room, or thought he did.

"Everything is in perfect shape, Don Haurea, as the papers will prove to you as soon as you examine them." That was the suave voice and it was followed immediately by the coarser one.

"Yes, old man, you better make the best of it. My mother and I are here to stay. We'll begin by having dinner with you. It's a long drive across the State and we both can do away with a good meal, ain't that so, Ma?"

"It's so, Ollie," the woman, who was no other than Lilly Boome, answered. "We've been traveling all day and it's mighty fateeguing even in a good car like ours."

"By gum and garters. What's she telling him that for," Jim demanded mentally and stepping swiftly to the portier, he cautiously moved the edge nearest the partition. In the long room he could see Mrs. Boome seated languidly in an easy chair, the two men occupied others, and while the third person sat upright, Ollie had the appearance of having taken possession. The boy saw the Don standing quietly, his back turned to the fire-

place, but he seemed in no way disturbed at either the guests or their astonishing attitude.

"As I told you before," he said calmly, "you have been badly advised."

"Now come sir, I am an attorney, I have with me conclusive evidence that my client married your father, this young man is their son."

"Yes, old man. I ain't blamin' you for balking at giving up such a hunk of your dough. I'd kick er stall myself if I had to fork over two-thirds of a fortune like that, must be well in the millions, ain't it?" Ollie chuckled with a smile of satisfaction as he dropped his cigar ashes on the rug. "It's good for moths," he remarked, then added. "And if I don't mind, you needn't, because I get lion's share—mine and Ma's."

"The fortune is well in the millions," Don Haurea replied without a moment's hesitation.

"I knew it," Ollie chuckled, then jumping to his feet he smacked his mother on the back. "You sure knew your onions, old woman, when you started to shine up to old Haurea."

"If I may be excused for reminding you,

sir," the lawyer spoke severely, "your manner is not exactly becoming toward your late esteemed father."

"Oh sure, that's all right. I never got a fair chance to know the old man, but I got a ton of respect for him. Any guy that can make as much money as that deserves respect, and I'm handin' it to him, but say, look here, my half-brother's been in possession for nearly three years while we were abroad. We gotta have an accounting of every penny he's used. You get busy on that first thing in the morning. Now, how about dinner—"

Just at that instant a firm hand was laid on Jim's shoulder and he was lifted from his post of observation, another hand placed over his mouth, then he was taken back to his chair, while Bob stared in amazement. He'd been so absorbed in his book that he hadn't seen or heard a thing and he sat as if he had just come out of a trance.

"Your conduct, sir—" the servant began softly, and Jim quickly put his finger to his lips.

"Listen, old chap, I'm glad you understand English. That woman in there and the

fellow Ollie say they just drove across the State. They're lying like blazes," the boy whispered. "This morning they sponged a ride with me in the plane from Laville to the Gordon ranch down near the end of the Cap. I dropped them there and they told me they were old friends of the Gordons. You better let Don Haurea know."

"Very well. You may observe." He stepped quickly back to the curtain, his fingers moved over the design, while with the other hand he pressed a button on the wall. That darkened the dining room, and Jim saw a small opening through which he could look without doing anything objectionable.

"What's going on?" Bob whispered, slipping up beside his step-brother.

"Shush." The servant withdrew and almost immediately the boys saw the lights in the other room, dim for an instant, then grow brighter. But this went unnoticed by the three odd characters.

"Another thing, old man, my brother, Ma's got one of them green rings like your—our dad used to wear. He gave it to her for me so she could prove I belong to the gang—the clan, and I'm entitled to take my place as a

full fledged member, see! And another thing, I'm getting in on your experiments here and elsewhere. You might as well understand that I ain't takin' any nonsense, now I'm here, and here I'm staying, and I'm taking what's mine, every sou. You might's well face the music," Ollie announced and his tone was anything but brotherly—or even half-brotherly.

"My dear Mr. Haurea, as my client I must advise you that your attitude is unbecoming. After dinner I am sure the Don, your half brother, will be glad to go over the matter in a gentlemanly manner with us, we will show him undisputable proof of yours and Mrs. Haurea's claims, and being an intelligent man, he is sure to see the wisdom of conceding to your position and your mother's."

"Well, I don't care—"

Just then the door was opened and the boys saw the servant standing quietly at attention. Ollie looked at the huge man uneasily, and his mother gave a choking sob.

"I ain't bein' bluffed by no ho-kus-pokus business," Ollie announced but his tone was less belligerent.

"You want something?"

"Yes, Master." The servant entered the room, and stood a moment speaking with the Don, who nodded, then seemed to dismiss him. As the door closed again, Ollie puffed at his cigar.

"You better tell the servants to fix Ma's room right away, and send her up something to eat. I got some real seravnts coming, none of these soft-feet fer me. I ain't going to have a man on the place I can't understand and—"

"I ain't bein' packed off upstairs," Lilly Boome, or Haurea, broke in angrily. "I'm knowing everything that's done, you understand that."

"Now Ma—"

"My dear Mrs.—" But the Don interrupted again.

"As I have tried to tell you several times since your arrival, you have been very badly advised and your claims are not worth the paper they are written on, even if my late father did marry your mother, which I happen to know—"

"How do you get that way?" Ollie inter-

rupted sharply and he banged his fist on the table.

"There is no special process. As your attorney just told you, I am not exactly an unintelligent man, nor was my father. During the years of his long life he was frequently subjected to unpleasantness of one kind or another so he learned how to protect himself—"

"What do you mean it won't make no difference me bein' married?" Lilly demanded impatiently. "I'm the widow, en I get a dower right to a third o' my husband's estate, en my son gits a third—that's the law, ain't it?" She turned for confirmation to the attorney.

"Certainly Mrs. Ha—"

"You are quite right regarding the law, and a man's wife can claim a third of his estate, provided he hasn't willed it elsewhere, or has any estate to divide," the Don told her.

"Didn't you just say it's in the millions?" Ollie snapped.

"I said that mine is. When he passed on, my father had only a few thousand dollars

of his own, which he willed to faithful servants. That was attended to—"

"What about this place—"

"It has been in my name for fifteen years," the Don answered. "You could have ascertained that fact had you taken the trouble to look into the matter. The records are at Laville. You should have taken time this morning when you were there to look them up—"

"Well, we're not giving up so easy as that you needn't think," Ollie blustered, furious with rage, then he turned to the lawyer, who had risen to his feet. "You serve them papers on this fellow so he can't do nothin' while we bring suit, hear—why didn't you do it when we got here instead o' lalligaging along, wasting time?"

"Do you mean to tell me that you never looked at the papers in Laville?" the attorney demanded hotly. "You blundering idiots —I told you to."

"No, what difference does that make, we didn't have time. We took an airplane—serve them papers, and serve 'em now—I'm searching this—"

"I'm not making a further fool of myself,

until I look into the matter," the lawyer told him coldly, "and my advice to you is that you get out of here before you make things any worse."

"Before you leave," the Don spoke quietly, "I may as well inform you that your coming tonight was not unexpected. Before you reached Houston I had warrants out for your arrest—"

"Arrest, you're crazy, I'll blow blazes out of this whole place—"

"You'll leave in five minutes, and if you are in Texas in the morning, you will be taken in custody for forgery, blackmail, false representation, defamation of my father's character, and house-breaking—"

"We ain't touched a thing in your blasted house," Ollie stormed, but behind his blustering manner they could see that he was frightened.

"My dear sir, aren't you putting it on pretty thick; housebreaking?" the lawyer interposed, then he added, "I can assure you that I undertook this case in the regular course of my business and I shall investigate your statement before I withdraw."

"My dear sir, do so by all means, and let

me remind you that you came here unannounced, you deliberately disregarded my servant and entered without invitation, which constitutes house-breaking. The fact that you will not get away with anything is not your fault nor your client's. Let me add that the patrol between here and Mexico is looking for you, I give you the tip for what it is worth. Goodnight!"

"It's a bluff, I say," Lilly stamped her feet. "I won't move an inch."

"And I won't. I know the tricks, I told you before we came in that you'd have to work fast, but you didn't," Ollie stormed at the lawyer, "Now you go to Laville and look at them papers, en start suit—"

"Good night," the Don repeated quietly. He stepped to the door and threw it wide. Quickly Zargo entered, his face like a mask and his whole body alert.

"I ain't goin' in the middle of the night," Lilly began to sob.

"Look here, you gotta—" Ollie didn't finish for Zargo stepped close to him, caught him with one hand by the collar, lifted him as if he'd been a puppy, turned him half around and grabbed him by the seat of his

trousers, then carried him howling and squirming to the door and passed outside. The lawyer and Lilly followed hastily, lest they be escorted in the same fashion. A minute later the car groaned and started on its way toward the road.

"Good show," Jim grinned widely.

"Shades of Sampson, but Zargo's a beaut," Bob added.

VII

THE TEST

"I believe that is the last we shall see of any of them," Don Haurea remarked as he returned quite unperturbed to his guests. "I am glad that you were here to witness the affair. They may try something else but I rather think they will be on their way."

"Capering cat-fish, but I'd have been broken-hearted if I'd missed it, especially the last part," Bob declared and they all laughed.

"What did they hope to gain?" Jim asked. "Ollie isn't your half-brother, is he?"

"He certainly is not. Had my father had a son of such low mental caliber, he would have put him out of his misery in his infancy. What they hoped to accomplish was a litigation which would take some time to settle and in the meanwhile, Ollie and his attorney would have spent every minute searching and digging around this place. No doubt the two of them have been drilled for months for such an undertaking, but their

superiors did not think to give the man lessons in such a small detail as not keeping his mouth shut. The fellow blustered in and didn't give his partner a moment to serve his papers until it was too late," the Don explained.

"If he had served them—" Jim said anxiously.

"I was quite prepared for them," Don Haurea answered. Just then the lights in the room shone blue.

"Is someone else coming?" Jim asked quickly and the man gave him a quick glance, then nodded.

"Your father." A minute later the Austin roadster drove up to the door and Don Haurea went quickly to welcome his neighbor.

"I presume that you have been anxious about your boys, Mr. Austin. Do come inside, they have had rather an adventure but are quite all right."

"That's good." The two men entered the room and Jim saw that his dad wore a worried expression as he took the seat the Don offered him.

"I cannot tell you what a pleasure it has been to make the acquaintance of your boys,

Mr. Austin, and to renew yours. I trust that we shall all see more of each other in the future."

"Thank you, Don Haurea. Fact is, the foreman at the Cross-Bar telephoned as Bob asked him to, then later the man rode over. He seemed to be uncertain in his mind, said that both Bob and Jim had acted strangely before they left in the plane for your ranch. It bothered him, so he came to—get it off his chest. I knew perfectly well that they were all right if they were here, but—you know how women are—my wife was upset, so I came to ride back with them."

"Great guns, it's after midnight," Bob exclaimed. "I had no idea it was so frightfully late."

"Nor I," Jim added.

"When the foreman saw the boys they had just gone through a very serious experience, it might have been quite disastrous, so it's no wonder if they were somewhat incoherent. My man Zargo found them tied up like a pair of chickens ready to roast." He went on and told the story of Dyke's treachery, and finally finished; "When they reached here, I knew they were probably battered,

so I had my man give them a good rub-down, and later I couldn't forego the pleasure of having guests for dinner."

"Dinner, why Jim ate—"

"That didn't make a bit of difference, Dad," Jim grinned.

"I certainly am mighty grateful to you, Don Haurea and to your man, for what he did, and I'm glad that you gave me the facts here now. I'll modify them before telling Mrs. Austin. The truth, well—she'd go into a fit of nervous prostration whenever one of them was out of her sight. I do not mind telling you that she shows no partiality between them, and would simply pass out with fear quite as much over Jim, as Bob."

"And Mr. Austin would raise the roof if anything happened to me," Bob put in soberly. "Gosh, he's dandy to me."

"Well," laughed Mr. Austin, "That's merely because Bob never lets me remember that he isn't my own son."

"If this mutual admiration meeting is about over, suppose we go home," Jim chuckled. "No sense in keeping Mom on the anxious seat."

"I'll telephone her that you are starting,

or would it make her easier to hear from you?"

"Not at all. Thank you very much, Don Haurea. I shall be most happy to be better acquainted with you, and trust that you will call upon me whenever you can—and," he hesitated for he was thinking of the Gordon's mysterious visit, "if there is anything I can do to assist you, please let me know immediately. We live in rather a wild section of the state."

"Thank you, I shall remember that. Give my apologies to Mrs. Austin for causing her further anxiety, and if I may, I shall visit the K-A within the next few days," Don Haurea promised heartily.

"We'll look for you," Jim declared.

"It'll be great to have you. One of those books I was reading had some—"

"Take it along with you, my boy, if there is anything of value to you in it. You can return it at your convenience," the Don urged, then added, "I shall send your car home tomorrow—or rather today."

"I presume the body of Dyke will be discovered," Mr. Austin said.

"I telephoned to the sheriff earlier in the

evening," the Don replied. "He was to send a deputy, or go himself. He'll probably pay you a visit and interrogate the boys before very long."

"We'll arrange that so that my wife will not learn too much of the details," Mr. Austin nodded, then he held out his hand. "I wish I could thank you adequately—" Into his mind came a vision of the boy's horrible plight, and he bit his lips.

"Mighty glad to have done anything to help them, they are quite a pair of—shall I say, Flying Buddies. I expect they will have some great adventures together."

"I expect they will," Mr. Austin laughed. "They have an uncanny knack of getting into things, both feet and wings first."

"Come along," Jim urged, and Bob yawned prodigiously.

"Gee, I can hardly keep my eyes open," he exclaimed.

He barely managed to stay awake until they reached home, where they all turned in, then he didn't open his eyes again until Mr. Austin called to say that the sheriff was there, had been waiting an hour and was anxious to get on.

"Your mother is out in the garden, Bob, so I'll bring him up here. Tell him as quickly as you can before she comes back."

"Yes sir." Both boys slipped into bath robes, and when they glanced at the clock it was nearly noon. The sheriff came into the room and greeted them soberly.

"Your pa's telling me something about this fellow Dyke that bumped into you yesterday. We sent the body on to town, but I gotta get a statement from you boys," he explained.

"Yes sir, that will not take long," Jim answered, and in a few minutes they had told of their meeting with Dyke.

"Now, this Zargo, he said he come along up the ditch toward the dam en he seen the fellow planting the bomb, so he hung around and as soon as he could, he threw water on it, then he saw you boys and let you loose and when he was helping you up the trail you-all found Dyke curled up dead. That right?"

"That's right. Zargo came from behind us and we couldn't see him until he was close," Bob explained.

"Wall, for my part, it's a durn shame

more fellows like this Dyke ain't meeting up with retribution so fast. The Lord surely did take notice of him and give him his just deserts pronto. Tain't going to be necessary for none of this to come out, the man's dead, so you can consider it finished, far's you're concerned. No use stretching the agony long as nothing can be gained by it. It's time I'm getting along. You might one or both of you drop into my office at Crofton some day this week. It there is anything else, I'll let you know. So long."

"Sorry we kept you waiting," Jim apologized.

"You needn't to mention that. Your Dad said you'd been sort of banged up, so I saw the lad Zargo, and took a good look under that dam. Easy 'nough to see what Dyke was up to—he was so sure of finishing the job he didn't take no precautions. See you some other time, boys." The officer of the law left them and the buddies sat staring at each other.

"Cholicky coyotes, did you tell Dad about the heir and heiress," Bob asked.

"Yes, thought I would because the Gordons were here the other night. How do you

feel, all right?" Jim asked.

"Sure, I've got my sleep out and I'm as limber as a cheese. How about you, any black and blue decorations?"

"Not one, the treatment was great stuff. Gosh, that performance yesterday and last night sure has my Nanny."

"Your Nanny—it's got my grandmother's singing Angora," Bob exploded. "What do you make of it, anyway? I thought you were going to get your neck wrung when you were gaping through that curtain, old man, but I suppose that voice was too much for you. Can't say I blame you, but why the heck did that trio, with their grand uproar, say they'd been traveling so long when it takes not more than two hours to come up Cap Rock from the Gordons in a car like the one they drove."

"The only answer I can find to that is that the Gordons are in on this business, somewhere, and they want to keep their connection dark," Jim replied softly.

"Then why in the name of stewed shoes did that pair get you to plant them on the ranch?" Bob objected.

"Well, of course, Lilly Boome didn't know

anything about our being in on it—they don't even know that we were at the Box-Z last night. I'm wondering if they are all of them, those we met beginning with Burnam, part of a gang that's working to get something from Don Haurea," Jim replied.

"Hump! Gee, you mean the Gordons, Boomes and Dyke?"

"Yes, and probably there are more."

"But the Gordons have lived here—"

"It's less than three years, and Dad told me yesterday morning that they tried darned hard to buy the Cross-Bar, offered a whale of a price for it, and finally took the ranch they have. It looks to me as if they wanted to be in the vicinity of the Box-Z; perhaps to keep watch somehow," Jim suggested.

"Whew. Last night the Don said something about their 'superiors', I suppose he must have meant the head of the gang," volunteered Bob. "It doesn't seem possible that either of the Gordons have sense enough to be heads of anything."

"I don't believe they're the heads, but whoever is at the top doesn't mind spending money to get what he wants."

"Must expect to get a whale of a stake back—"

"Aren't you boys hungry?" Mrs. Austin called.

"And how!" Bob shouted. The subject was dropped until they were nearly ready to go down stairs, then Mr. Austin came to the door.

"May I come in?"

"Foolish question, you may not stay out," Bob answered.

"Do you boys ever get hunches?" he asked, as he took a chair.

"Herds of them," Bob replied.

"Big as elephants," Jim supplemented.

"There's nothing like a joy-ride close to the stars to start a man's brains to working. Last night, or rather this morning, when we were flying home, I had one and the longer I think of it, the more real it becomes," Mr. Austin told them.

'What is it, Dad?"

"There is more behind the attack on you yesterday than the fact that I refused employment to Dyke. He was going to blow up the dam; the water would have done considerable damage to the Box-Z, which seems to

be the focal point of interest for some unknown reason, and this man Dyke was with the one in Vermont that you boys met. I do not know exactly on what you founded your suspicions of him, except that you were told he was a 'bad man' and certainly his partner's actions prove that point," he replied.

"Perhaps there is," Bob agreed. "Any idea what it may be, sir?"

"None. Thought you might supply that link—"

"Dinner's served, men-folk," Mrs. Austin called.

"Coming." They went down to the meal so nothing more was said of unpleasant hunches, and if there were any problems buzzing around in the minds of her men-folk, they were mighty careful to conceal it behind a jolly exterior. Dessert was finished when a car drove up to the door and Jim went to see who the guests might be. He was dumb-founded to riscover that it was young Arthur Gordon.

"Hello, Jim."

"Come on in," Jim invited mechanically.

"Can't, you know. Just ran up to tell you that we're having a barbecue next week and

we hope that you-all will take part. There'll be the racing and that sort of stuff, and we've been trying to get a stunt flyer to add to the fun. I watched you land on the chalk cliff yesterday morning, and while I don't pretend to know much about planes, it looked like a grand piece of piloting to me. Dad suggested that we ask you and Bob to do the air-stuff for us," Arthur explained cheerfully.

"I don't know, we've never gone in for that sort of thing, not any more than we had to, and Bob's pretty busy on the Cross-Bar these days," Jim told him.

"Well, great Scott, you'll have to come to the party. We don't have very much fun in these parts. Don't turn us down, we're banking on your help," Arthur answered earnestly.

"That so! You see, we've been to the Frisco Coast, and only got back a few days ago, so we hadn't heard anything about it. I'll talk it over with the folks—"

"Fine, you let us know as soon as you can about the stunts. I sure hope you-all don't disappoint us. I'd mighty like to see such an exhibition. Horses, and racing are kind of

tame these days. Enjoy your trip west?" Arthur released the clutch.

"It was a good hop. Come again."

"Great place out there, full of hot air, see you again." Arthur backed, turned and raced away in a cloud of dust, while Jim returned to the family and told them what was wanted.

"Well," Mrs. Austin spoke sharply. "I shall not permit any such thing, no sir, neither one of you, the very idea of those Gordons presuming to ask an Austin or a Caldwell to play the clown for them. I should say not. Besides, I should be simply terrified to death, my dear." She turned appealingly to her husband. "Please forbid it."

"I do."

"Stern parent stuff," Jim laughed.

"I mean it, my son."

"All right, Sir, that settles it as far as I'm concerned."

"Here too," Bob added, then turning to his mother. "Now, don't you go worrying, Mom, it won't come off, besides I saw some things in that book the Don loaned me. I'm going to see how they work. The barbecue sounds like a lot of wasted time to me."

"Thank you, my son." Mrs. Austin turned to her husband. "Did you know the Gordons were giving such a party, my dear?"

"This is the first I've heard of it," her husband answered.

"Perhaps they're doing it to entertain their guests," she remarked, and the affair was dismissed for other topics. As it was Sunday, the day was spent quietly, and even the boys were glad to take things easy. Bob kept his nose buried in the book, while Jim went back to the radio he hadn't finished the day before. During the evening they experimented together, but the instrument did not quite come up to specifications, so they put on their thinking caps and started to figure how it could be improved to do as required, but accomplished little and finally gave up for the night. The next morning young Caldwell set out for the Cross-Bar, this time one of the cowboys accompanied him, while Jim gave Her Highness an overhauling.

"Telephone for you, Jim," the house boy shouted.

"Coming."

"It proved to be Don Haurea who ex-

plained that he was making some tests, and if the boys were interested, they might come and see the result.

"Bob's at the Cross-Bar—"

"Be glad to have you alone, Jim. Perhaps your Buddy can join us later," the Don replied.

"I'll come on wings," Jim answered, and he was keenly interested to get to the Box-Z for he had an idea that the experiments would be well worth seeing. It did not take him long to get ready, explain to his parents where he was going, and telephone to Bob, who had just reached the Cross-Bar.

"Perhaps I'll come later, Jim, but I'd awfully like to start some of these things. It'll take me all morning, perhaps longer. If I finish before you leave the Box-Z, I'll run over in the Liza-Lou."

"Very well, old man. Good luck to you. If you don't get over, I can tell you about them. So long."

"Meet you in the soup, old horse," Bob chuckled and hung up. Jim went out to the plane, jumped into Her Highness, who hopped into the air, and presently hopped onto the ground on the neighboring ranch.

VIII

WORTH SEEING

"You are certainly not permitting any grass to grow under your wings," the Don smiled when Jim presented himself.

"Her Highness is no slouch when it comes to speed," Jim answered, "Besides, I'm all tuned-in to know what's doing."

"Very well. You shall not be kept waiting." Don Haurea led the way to the small private room where they had had their first confidential talk. Stepping to one side, he touched a hidden spring and a section of the wall slid open, revealing a tiny room, about seven by seven by ten feet high. They entered, the door was closed after them, and the small room began to descend swiftly.

"An elevator," Jim gasped in astonishment.

"Or lift," as they are called in England. "Either term is descriptive."

"Never expected to find one in a house on Cap Rock."

"Yet it was installed when my father was

a very young man. In my own generation it has been improved but slightly."

"Great scott, and it's run by electricity—"

"Not exactly as you know it," the Don told him. "By the way, I have had one of my men put her esteemed majesty under cover so that your presence here at the Box-Z will not become public property."

"You mean the plane, Her Highness?"

"Exactly. Here we are." The car stopped, a door slid silently—and the two stepped into what looked like a long white tiled hallway. "We will make some changes in dress and it will be well if you will permit me to register your heart action."

"Oh sure, if you want to," Jim agreed but he certainly was puzzled.

They walked a few feet to an alcove and in a moment the boy saw that instead of a bare room, it was lined with long closets. The Don opened several light-metal doors and behind one of them Jim saw something that looked like a scale. In another hung suits, something the style of his own flying togs, but of a much lighter material, with high, close-fitting soft collars.

"Change to one of these," the Don in-

vited, and at the same time he began to remove his own outer garments. "Oh!" He stopped suddenly. "I should like to ask one question."

"Shoot."

"Are you afraid of me?"

"Afraid of you, why of course not!" the boy declared.

"Thank you. Now, have you any uneasiness regarding what I may show you?"

"I'm crazy to see what it is!" Jim answered earnestly.

"Very good. I need not add that I am confident that you will keep your adventure here this morning—er, under your hat."

"You bet I will. I may try to work something myself, if you don't mind that," he added.

"Anything that you can make use of, I shall be glad to help you."

By that time they were both changed and looked like a pair from some other world. The suits which opened across the chest, were not tight, but they were sufficiently close-fitting to permit unhampered movement. Their feet were strapped to white sandals which were made of something Jim had

never seen before. Even the bands which held them in place were of a flexible woven material and had no buckles. Jim's were a bit loose, so the Don took a flat brush, dipped it into a receptacle in the wall, and carefully painted the liquid along the edge. The composition, whatever it was, drew the foot gear into the proper size and shape.

"Well, that's one way of making shoes fit," the boy grinned. "Great guns, I never can learn all the things you have—it would take a life time."

"It might. Step here." He pointed to the scale and the boy stood in the centre. His attention was attracted by a whirling dial and a moment later he saw that his height, five feet nine and three-quarters inches were registered, as well as his weight, chest expansion, respiration, heart action, and last but not least, his disposition was indicated. He laughed heartily and as he did so the lights in the room glowed a soft yellow.

"That says I'm even tempered."

"It's changed," the Don told him and Jim looked again. "This time he saw that he was very good-natured, had a sense of humor and a mental capacity above the average.

"A regular little fortune teller."

"We will proceed, because it tells me that your heart action is good and that your brain is capable of grasping logic and evidence without rebelling or acting abnormally."

"Why did you ask if I am afraid of you?" Jim wanted to know.

"Just to be sure. A boy of your scientific turn of mind might come with me out of keen curiosity, yet behind that desire to investigate and even learn, he might be hiding, or trying to hide, a very real fear which later would force him to act unwisely; not follow directions perhaps and possibly hurt himself."

"Oh, I'll follow directions, I thought it might be because I—" He stopped abruptly. It was on the tip of his tongue to say because he knew of the Gordon's attitude, or had seen Dyke rendered helpless by some unseen means.

"Because of what?" Don Haurea asked with a smile.

"Oh, Dyke's demise—or—well, you may as well know, the Gordons came to my father the other night and made some sort of crazy

claims. I didn't get head or tail of them, Dad didn't either, but nothing those guys could start would make us side with them."

"You are not convinced that Dyke's 'demise' was exactly what it looked like, or that my man Zargo was not in some way responsible?"

'It doesn't stand to reason," Jim insisted, and the man smiled again.

"Have you spoken of that to anyone?"

"Not a soul, not even Dad, and there isn't much I don't tell him," Jim answered promptly. "Whatever it was Zargo did, I'm blamed grateful for—even if I am almost eaten up with curiosity."

"That is good. Now, tell me about these Gordons. Isn't that the ranch where you dropped Ollie and Lilly Boome?"

"Yes, that's the place. I don't know much about them really, but Bob and I were gasing yesterday and wondering if they are in some sort of gang. It seemed odd that Lilly Boome and her boy friends told you they'd just come across the State, unless they wanted to keep the folks down the Cap out of it."

"That might be, perhaps we can find out." He asked several questions, and finally

knew as much as Jim did in the matter, then he added, "Permit me, my young friend, to urge you to—as you say—watch your step. The Gordons may, or may not connect you with us here, or with Corso who was in Vermont, but if they think that you are in their way they will hesitate at nothing to rid themselves of you."

"We'll be careful. I think Dad is sort of anxious too. Arthur Gordon came up yesterday and wanted us to do stunts for their barbecue. You should have heard Bob's mother set her foot down, and Dad backed her to the limit. It isn't often either of them positively forbids anything, but this time they didn't leave a crack for an argument, so we promised. We were not especially interested in making clowns of ourselves, but it's all off."

"Your parents are wise. I'll add to my other precaution, that you not only watch your step, but keep your eyes on Her Highness. Never get into her cock-pit without being absolutely positive that nothing has been tampered with. While you are here this morning, I'll have one of my men put something on the plane which will make her im-

mune for many of the known methods of putting her out of business."

"Thanks a lot," Jim said earnestly. "May I know what is done?"

"You may see it done. Come."

He led the way along the hall until they reached a section where it crossed one going the opposite direction, then turning to the right, they entered a small room. A tall young man, he might have been a boy, was seated on a stone bench before a table of the same material. He rose at their entrance, opened a door at his left, and Jim saw a huge, long room with other benches, tables, shelves, closets and more kinds of testing apparatus and indicators than he had ever dreamed existed. At work in different parts of the place were other fine looking young men, and while the majority of them rose, or stood at attention at the Don's appearance, a few who seemed to be watching something important, did not raise their eyes. Don Haurea spoke a few words, one of the youngest came forward, and the others returned to their work, whatever it was. Beyond this room was a smaller one, where the three stopped, and the Don spoke

to the youth, who immediately set about opening doors and arranging paraphernalia.

"Some lab," Jim sighed with joy.

"Please to be seated here," the young man invited.

"This is Ynilea, he knows you," the Don introduced them, and the pair grinned at each other by way of acknowledgment. Ynilea pressed a button, a panel slid back, revealing what looked like a long pane of colored glass. The man spoke a few words.

"Yes sir," came the response, and then, on the glass, Jim saw the inside of a barn-like building, and a cowboy was stepping up to Her Highness. He took a can of something that looked like paint, mixed it carefully with the contents of another can, then began to apply the solution to the wires of the plane, and every bit of metal.

"In case anyone tries the trick of dropping acid on it, expecting to have her go to pieces in the air, the liquid will merely dissolve the stuff," Don Haurea explained. "It will be applied to every part. After a flight, if you will look over the bus you may find some tiny bubbles which will warn you that something has been used."

"Gee, that's wonderful," Jim exclaimed.

"It is quite a protection. Now, we shall see what is going on down the Cap, and perhaps learn something to our advantage." Her Highness faded from sight, and a moment later, the boy saw the outlines of the Gordon ranch houses. Swiftly different parts were revealed until finally they stopped in the rough living-room, where the two Gordons were seated alone. The older man rose to his feet and paced the floor nervously, until finally his son growled.

"For heaven's sake, sit down."

"Well, I don't like it, I tell you!"

"I suppose you think I do," young Gordon retorted. Then the telephone rang, and he lifted off the receiver eagerly. The expression of his face changed, as did his tone. "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Austin. Dad and I were looking forward to having the boys. Anyway, you-all will be here, won't you," he said persuasively. As he talked Jim noticed a greenish sort of light reflected on the glass. "Awfully sorry." He hung up the receiver and turned to his father, his face contorted with rage.

"What is it?" the elder Gordon demanded.

"I'm damn sure those blasted Austins smell a rat. Why in blazes didn't you get those invitations out?"

"Won't they come?"

"Mrs. Austin says she is very sorry, but they have other plans, and neither she nor her husband are willing that the boys should do any stunting. So that's off. We got to get up a good one, or the big gazabo will be down here on us. We'll be in a grand fix if he ditches us without a cent, and gets rid of us in one of the usual ways." The young man's lips were white, and the light about him became a glittering pink. "What in blazes happened to Dyke?"

"You know he's dead" the old man answered tensely.

"Yes, you bull head, I know he's dead, but what killed him, that's what I want to know! All the coroner will say is that he died of heart failure, a likely story—he didn't have a heart to fail—"

"You better be careful how you go around asking questions. Some of these hicks are not so dumb as they look."

"Oh, shut up. I tell you there's something rotten—no one dares go near that dam

again, and that bunch of fools—I don't believe they ever went to Haurea at all—got cold feet and beat it for Oklahoma. They were blamed careful not to send the wire until they were near the northern border. Now, we're left here holding the bag."

"You will have those men placed under constant observation," the Don said quietly to his assistant, who pressed a button and in a moment one of the men from the larger laboratory came to the door. He was given instructions, nodded, then withdrew, and the scene Jim had been watching in horrified wonder, faded from his vision.

"Suffering short-horns — wow — that's some pair," he whistled, then asked quickly, "What do those colored lights mean, Don Haurea?"

"You are very thorough in your observations. I will tell you. Every human being, regardless of his exterior, has very pronounced—tendencies, we'll call them for the sake of simplicity. Each tendency, such as hate, pleasure, kindliness, intelligence, and so on, can be registered. You haven't time to examine the instruments today, perhaps later you will, but for the present it is

enough that you have seen the Gordons alone, with no one around from whom to conceal their real feelings, and they have indicated anger and fear. Had I not seen their faces I would have known by the green and pink light reflections. You and your brother in the dining room with me last night were grateful and kindly, so the lights were yellow. When the three tourists were coming within the zone, the lights in the room changed to register their greed, and no small amount of nervousness lest their plans miscarry."

"That's wonderful, I'd like to know what sort of instrument you use to overcome space, so I could hear the Gordons talking —is it a kind of television and radio?"

"A glorified combination of both. It will be just as well if you do not try to investigate the instruments today. I have planned to show you several things which will take some time—however, if you'd rather—"

"I have a hunch that if I let you run your own show I'll see more," Jim answered quickly. "You won't object to my telling Bob about it?"

"Not at all. How would you like to see

what that young man is doing?"

"Fine." The panel in front of the boy darkened a moment, then the light grew, and to Jim's astonishment he saw his step-brother apparently playing in a sand heap, but on closer inspection, he made out that Bob was busily filling some cans, labeling them, and setting them in an old hot-bed frame. While he worked, one of the helpers on the ranch drove up in an old cart, and took out three pails of earth.

"Thank you. Sure you marked them right?" Bob called soberly.

"Yes. This comes from the hole in the pasture, and this from the river bottom, and this from that gol-durned piece of sand that ain't no good fer nothin'. I kept 'em separate—"

"Is he going to analyze the soil?" Jim asked eagerly.

"And experiment with it. He has evidently been making good use of that book he borrowed. Now, suppose you take a look at something which happened yesterday," Don Haurea invited. "Let's see what your friend Zargo was doing in the afternoon."

"All right, Sir." Jim sat up tensely, pre-

pared to watch with all his attention, and in a second the space in front of him began to dance, then the motion lessened slowly, and something went by, like the film of a moving picture. "It looks like one of these rooms."

"It is," the Don replied.

Jim leaned forward so he wouldn't miss anything in the picture. He saw a door open in the further end of the room and Zargo entered. He wore one of the costumes used in the laboratories, and proceeded to a section which was apparently his own. He took out some books and for a few minutes examined records, or something of the sort, then he watched a deep glass tube, and finally he shoved a near-by panel back and seemed to be having a look about the country side. What he saw was plain to Jim's vision, and he soon decided that Zargo was observing the stream, known as the creek, which had been turned from the Pearl River on the Cross-Bar ranch. The scene followed the course of the water and in a minute the old dam came into view. Jim held his breath as he started, and presently he saw the picture stop near the cliff. In the shrubbery he

made out a small man, which was no other than Dyke, who was scooping a hole near one of the rocks at the bottom of the trail. Then he did something with a long can. Some sound attracted his attention, so he hastily covered the tin, and hid it under the shrubbery.

"That's the bomb," Jim whispered, and he felt perspiration standing out on his forehead. He watched Dyke race stealthily up the zig-zag trail, hardly making a sound, and then the boy heard Bob's familiar whistle as he rode through a strip of timber. The outlaw reached the top before the boy came into view, then circled about, dodging from stone to stone, or behind brush. Soon Bob entered the picture, dismounted, and started briskly toward the dam. Something came with a swish from behind him, Caldwell was thrown on his face, and dragged to the trail. After that, Jim could not make out what happened, for Zargo stood up quickly, called, and a second man hurried to his post, while two others went with him to a higher part of the building, where Zargo changed swiftly into his clothes, while one of his helpers brought an oblong thing, twice as

tall as a man, which seemed to be made of glass. It was opened in half like a violin case, and Zargo got in, adjusted some straps, took a small box from the third man and was shut inside the oblong, which Jim guessed was a rocket. This was set on a tripod arrangement, and shot through an opening which yawned like a great mouth, and closed immediately. The rocket raced so swiftly over the wild country that it was like a blur across the film, and finally settled to the ground below the dam, where Zargo got out and quietly covered it with brush.

"So, that's how he got there." Jim barely whispered, and before his amazed eyes he watched every move in the near-tragedy of Saturday afternoon. He saw himself bound later and questioned, then he saw Zargo press the small box tightly in his hand. Immediately he heard a whir, like the beating of wings, then a moment later Dyke racing up the cliff, suddenly stopped helplessly, finally dropped shrieking madly, and next he saw himself and his step-brother being freed from the bonds.

"Great Scott—gee," he laughed a bit hys-

terically, then set his lips grimly, and regained control of himself. "If a movie producer could see that, Bob and I could get jobs in the talkies."

"I'm not sure that anything that wasn't spontaneous would be so good," Don Haurea answered. "I'll bet I know your next question, young man—what's that box?"

"That's it," Jim answered eagerly.

"A simple little thing carried for an emergency. I'll give you a demonstration of how it works later, if you like, and, I do not mind telling you that I am hoping you will assist me in trying it out on a larger scale when we are back in the house," Don Haurea told him.

"Be tickled pink," Austin replied promptly.

"Very well. Before we go up, I'll show you something more." This time the man led the way to another bench and panel and he pressed a switch.

"Is it past or present?" Jim wanted to know.

"You tell me."

"If I can," Jim replied, then he set himself to observe with the utmost care, for he

suddenly realized that the movie, in which he and Bob had taken such a dramatic part, was far better than anything that he had ever seen; the tones superior to any he had heard. In the television the scenes and action were so perfect that he had almost forgotten as he watched that he was not within a few feet of the spot. Now, onto the glass came a picture of a long room, very like the one he occupied, but the walls, instead of being plain white, were beautifully decorated with mosaic figures of marvelous coloring and design. In a moment he saw several men and at last he saw only one. It was a tall slender boy, whose skin was dark. Heavy hair was brushed from his forehead and held by a band, from which were suspended, one on each side of his face, long tassels which fell to his chest. The youngster wore some sort of rich tunic, heavy with embroidery, and around his neck hung a massive gold chain set with brilliant stones. He was standing at a table, testing equipment before him, with several books resting on a low shelf close at hand. On a raised dial, Jim saw a row of round spots, like buttons, and suddenly one of these glowed brightly. Im-

mediately a bell tinkled a clear note, and the boy looked up expectantly. It seemed as if he looked straight into Jim's eyes, and young Austin gasped.

"It—it's that boy, Corso's nephew—"

"Hello," came the well remembered voice.

"Hello, yourself," Jim answered. "How did you get here?"

"I urge you to investigate me," the boy retorted quickly and his lips parted in a wide smile. For a second Jim didn't understand, then he remembered his own slang.

"That's no way to say, search me," he laughed.

"Will it not do, Jim-Bob, old scout?" came the query.

"It's just great," Jim assured him.

"I shall see you—I mean—close by in a short time, Jim-Bob-Old Scout," the youngster promised.

"That will be great, gosh—" The vision changed and the glass was blank.

"Was that the present?" he asked Don Haurea.

"It was. Now, I'll tell you, that records are made of almost everything we do here, later the films are examined, some are of

no value, the very important ones are stored away for future use, and a few are kept for immediate use, like the one of the dam, or for instruction purposes. I think perhaps you have had enough for today, at least you will have had enough when we finish upstairs. Shall we go?"

"All right," Jim agreed reluctantly for he hated to leave, and as they passed out, he envied the fellows who were working or studying there. "I say, what happened to that—that rocket Zargo went in—I'd mighty like to see one of those."

"We got it home that night. I'll be glad to show you one, perhaps send you joy riding another time, but you will find that you have been here many hours," the Don answered.

"Jinks, have I? Well, it's been great." Finally they were back in the house, and when he looked out at the world—that part he could see of it, he felt as if he had been away to a strange country for a long time and this land to which he had returned was not real.

"We'll have lunch, then I'll be happy to have your assistance."

IX

DISTRESS

When the two took their places at the lunch table, Jim noticed a bit of cord beside the Don's plate. It was so small and inconspicuous that the boy would never have noticed it if the whole service had not been so orderly. He expected to see it tossed aside or handed to the servant, but his host picked it up, ran it through his fingers, and as he did so, Austin had a vague idea that he had seen something of the sort before, but he couldn't bring it to his memory. They applied themselves to the first part of the meal, then, suddenly into the young fellow's mind came the recollection of the day in Vermont when he and Bob had followed Corso and his nephew to the shore of Lake Champlain, where they watched the small boat disappear around the bend. Caldwell had picked up an odd box and when the lid came off, a bit of colored string, with many knots, dropped into his palm. A minute later, the two strangers hurried back, and

the boy's delight at recovery of his treasure seemed far greater than its value warranted. The piece of string beside the Don's place was the same sort of thing and now Jim knew that it was a message, and that this method of communication and recording dated more than a thousand years back.

"You have seen a Quipus before?" the Don remarked pleasantly.

"In Vermont, and I heard something about it there, too," Jim replied.

"Indeed. Well, this is from the cowboy who was going over your plane. He says it is well made, exceptionally so, that he has finished his work on it, but he could, by making a few changes in the tail ensemble, about the propeller, and at the controls, double its speed and endurance for you. A couple of the men can make the changes in a short time. Shall I tell him to go ahead?"

"Leaping lizards, that would be great. What he did this morning is mighty valuable. We don't want to impose on him, or on you," Jim answered.

"Then we'll put in the requisition." The man put three small knots close together in the string and handed it to the servant.

"Does that—do those three knots mean—"

"They mean 'leaping lizards' go ahead," Don Haurea told him and Jim laughed heartily.

"I say, you should have a son—you'd make a dandy father," he declared.

"Thank you, I hope I do." There was the merriest twinkle in the dark eyes and Austin flushed with confusion.

"Have you got a son?"

"Four and two daughters."

"Well, that's great—well—," an idea hit the boy so hard that he blinked, then he stammered—"Is that boy we know, Bob and I, I mean, is he your son?"

"My oldest son. Perhaps you understand better now why I feel so deeply indebted to you and your Flying Buddy," Don Haurea spoke very earnestly, and Jim gulped.

"Jumping Sphinxes, he's a great kid. Bob and I liked him the minute we saw him, and the Fentons—Mrs. Fenton was crazy about him."

"You were all very kind to him—I have been fully informed."

"I never saw him around here."

"No, probably not. We did not return to

Texas until about three years ago. At that time, I think you and your step-brother were going to school. Before that, we were in various parts of the world, then my father's health failed, and we came home, but the other children are younger than Yncicea and their mother took them last year where they started their studies under descendants of the ancient masters."

"And don't you see them—"

"At least once a month. The rocket method of traveling is a great space reducer, and occasionally they come here for a holiday."

"Then that isn't so bad. Bob and I got lonesome as heck when we were away from the parents very long. I say, may I ask another question?"

"Shoot."

"Are all the men who work for you on this ranch descendants of that old race?"

"A few are not. About half a dozen. We often meet men of superior ability who are anxious and ready for advanced sciences. We are glad to assist them, but we take the precaution of testing them frequently and when one shows a sign of dishonesty, he is sent to a different station and given another

trial. Usually that cures him because he discovers that when he goes out into the world he is misunderstood and has a difficult time trying to adjust himself to methods of living which he has outgrown," Don Haurea explained.

"Did that fellow Burnam work here?"

"No. He was never on this place. He did some menial work in one of the provinces in South America. He was trusted beyond his capacity—and that developed an insatiable greed in him."

"Is he the head of that gang that wants to get in here?"

"He hasn't sense enough to be the head of anything, but I have learned that his habit of talking too much was one of the contributing causes for the gang's recent activities. It was started two generations ago and in the last fifteen years has grown enormously."

"Well, can't you find out who is in it?"

"We know," the man replied with unconcern.

"That's good, then you can keep six jumps ahead of them," Jim announced.

"With ease. They do sometimes get—one

over on us—but it is never more than a minor incident, and they always fall far short of the goal they set."

"Should think they'd get tired trying."

"In your studies of the history of the world, Jim, you must have noticed that men will persevere through long years, suffer numberless setbacks, and struggle over seemingly insurmountable obstacles, even commit heinous crimes, if they believe that their reward will be riches and power."

"Yes, I know that, and most often the fellow who finally got it, gambled it away, or got cheated out of it and died of starvation, or something like that."

"Exactly."

"In school we had to learn about the discoveries, and all that sort of thing of course. People made a big fuss over the explorers but a few had brains enough to record them at their real value, and now there are stacks of books and the authors show how a lot of those fellows, instead of doing something remarkable, really retarded the progress of the races by their ignorance and bigotry. I talked with Dad about it and he said it was so, that the men, that is many of them, just

stumbled on things and right away they proved they were inferior by their lack of vision and their ruthless destructiveness—It was awful—of course some of them were fine chaps but if the better ones tried to enforce decency, some mut would come along and spoil it. Howling fish cakes, but I sure am talking my head most off—" Jim stopped abruptly. "I beg your pardon, Sir."

"You need not apologize, my boy, I am most interested in your views. I'm wondering if you would care to come here and study history, or any of the sciences under some of my men—"

"Sobbing silk-worms, Don Haurea, do you mean it—great guns—say, Mom's been trying to break me of slang—I'm worse than Bob—but, somehow, the craziest things slide out when I open my mouth—I certainly should like to study here—meteorology and chemistry—oh, but whew, I haven't got brains enough—"

"It's settled that you will come, provided of course, that Mr. and Mrs. Austin have no objections," the Don smiled, and Jim whistled.

"They might object fast enough to us

being clowns, or things like that, but they won't put a straw in the way, I know—why, one of the first things Bob's mother did was make me go to school."

"You get their permission and start as soon as you like. I judge that Bob is more interested in the ranch—"

"Yes sir, he is. He intends to make an ace-high place of the Cross-Bar and anything that will help do that he likes most," Jim replied.

"We'll give him every assistance we can. There is a great deal to be learned in agriculture, also stock raising. Now, if you are ready I'll show you one more exhibit and perhaps it will answer your great question regarding Dyke," Don Haurea told him.

"You said there is something that I can do to help you," Jim reminded his host.

"It all comes under the one head. Shall we start?"

"Yes sir!" Jim was on his feet and eager to know what came next.

"At various points in the house and buildings are small buttons. Here is one of them." The man pointed out a spot in the woodwork

of the room, and another in the edge of the old fashioned buffet. "Let me see how many more you can find.

"Here's one," Jim said promptly as he spied a similar place in the casing of the door. Then he went inside and out until he counted twelve of the small buttons. The last one was on one of the posts which supported the veranda. "Yes, and here's another." It was in the top of an ancient Spanish chair.

"You are, as I said before, very observing. While you are about the place, keep your eyes open for others. Here is something else!" He took a small oblong box, not much larger than his hand and made of dark, shiny wood which might have been ebony.

"It looks like the box Zargo carried when he went to the dam in that rocket, Sir."

"It is the same thing. Take it in your hand and hold it so." He gave it to Jim who followed instructions carefully. "Here comes a cat, stand facing her and press your thumb slightly." The boy did, keeping his eyes on the cat. He noticed an odd whirring sound about them, then he saw the pussy, head up, and one foot raised to step, stop short. She

stood perfectly still, the breeze blowing her fur, and might have been a stuffed animal instead of a live one. "Raise your thumb." Jim did, the cat shook herself vigorously, gave the pair an indignant glance and tore away as if chased by a hundred dogs. Up the nearest tree she leaped and did not pause until she was in one of the topmost branches.

"Wow, what did it do to her?"

"Gave her a slight shock so that she couldn't move. The buttons I pointed out to you do the same thing on a vastly larger scale. Pressing one of them raises a barrier as impossible as if it were made of stone, and two of them will throw a perfect protection about the whole house beyond the barns."

"Like a wall, an electric wall," Jim exclaimed.

"Exactly. When one is pressed it signals the laboratories and the men watching there immediately look for the danger. If there is any, they use their judgment about increasing the territory, strength of the current and of course lose no time in helping further."

"They look in those mirrors, or glass plates—it's how I saw Bob at work on the Cross-Bar?"

"That is correct. Now, I'm going to ask you to help me. We test these things out periodically and my men know exactly how they work and affect individuals. I should like to know how it affects you because you have never experienced it. Don't agree, if you are at all afraid."

"I'm not," Jim declared positively.

"Thank you. Then walk out there beyond the bunk house and start for the veranda. I rather wish that you would not come by any subscribed way, but as if you were coming in casually and not too particular about paths," the man said.

"Yes, Sir." Jim ran to the bunk house where he saw a cowboy watching him curiously. They both grinned, and beyond the door, the boy turned.

"Hello, Jim Austin. When you take your plane up, don't forget that the controls respond a little differently than you have been accustomed to, so go easy at first."

"All right, I'll remember. Thanks a lot for fixing her up."

"She's a grand little bus. You knew machines when you selected her."

"We think she's fairly decent," Jim replied, then he started the return to the veranda, strolling leisurely along among the trees. He passed a grassy plot and saw Don Haurea sitting smoking in the Spanish chair. "Hello," he called, then started to come at a dog-trot pace, increasing his speed until he was running. He was still several rods from his goal when suddenly he stopped, his body just as Dyke's had been there on the cliff. The boy felt a slight tingling sensation in his toes, which did not go any further, but he could not move. There was no feeling of discomfort, not the slightest pain, but he had lost all control over his anatomy. He saw the quiet scene, heard the soft noises that he recognized, and his eyes turned toward the man on the veranda who was watching him closely.

"I believe I can get through this," Jim said to himself and he made a most determined effort of will to accomplish his purpose, but it was futile. He was as helpless as when he lay bound hand and foot under the dam waiting for the explosion. It seemed to him that he stood there fully an hour, then he saw Don Haurea move slightly, very

gradually his own body relaxed, and mechanically he proceeded forward.

"Splendid," the Don smiled. "How did it feel?"

"Like nothing at all—perhaps a sense of laziness would best describe it, the way I am sometimes early in the morning when I just hate to move. The only thing was, it seemed a long time, but I have a hunch it wasn't," he explained carefully.

"It was half a minute," the Don answered.

"Well, it seemed like an hour at least. Now, I can understand why Dyke, held that way and knowing that the bomb would go off in seven or eight minutes would have been terrified to death. He wouldn't reason that someone must be around and that he'd probably be released, so he just dropped dead from fear of being caught in the destruction he started."

"Great work."

"And I'm even more obliged than ever to Zargo for coming after us. He certainly saved us—the boys from the Cross-Bar would have found us in chop meat, and the country being flooded," Jim said soberly,

then added, "Is there anything more you want me to try, Sir?"

"Thank you, my boy, no. You have given me valuable assistance."

"Then I reckon I'd better be flying along. The folks know I'm here, of course, and won't be worried. Jinks, I'm sorry Bob missed it all."

"He can be introduced to some of it later. Thank you for coming, and let me know if the parents are willing to have you study in my labs."

"I certainly will," Jim agreed heartily. He bade his host good-bye for the time being, and soon he was in the cock-pit of Her Highness. Before he opened the throttle, he recalled the cowboy's instructions, so he tried things out. They were smooth as silk and presently the little plane bellowed and raced into the air as she had never raced before. It made Jim gasp, but in a moment he was so delighted that he waggled her wings because he couldn't shout above the commotion she made. The trip home meant nothing in the life of Her Highness, but she had hardly reached the southern boundary of the Haurea ranch when the young pilot saw

a plane, a mere speck in the distance, coming swiftly north. It wasn't very often that one came over along the edge of Cap Rock, and Jim's heart leaped at the sight of an airman. Tipping Her Highness' nose, he climbed joyously into the sky until he was twenty thousand feet, and he saw that the other chap was trailing along good-naturedly, as if he too felt like having a frolic.

Jim banked, and circled in wide, swift sweeps, then he noticed that the other pilot was either having some sort of trouble, or he was not a very experienced man. The boy watched carefully and a bit anxiously, until, to his horror, he saw the other plane start earthward at a terrific speed, the engine full on, as far as he could tell.

"Guess he's just stunting for fun and will pull out," Jim tried to assure himself, but it wasn't convincing.

If the fellow was in trouble he might be able to help. Young Austin had seen a few smashups, in fact he and his Flying Buddy had helped one of the mail pilots when he came down, but Jim didn't want to see this chap land in a crash on the jagged edge of Cap Rock. Shutting off his own engine he

started to follow in a steep glide, guiding Her Highness so that she would not be too near the spot if the other plane landed, or in her way if she turned up her nose again and took to the air. Down they went until the altitude meter registered a thousand feet, then five hundred. The other plane was half way to the ground and Jim wondered why the man didn't jump out and save himself with his parachute.

"He must be fooling—rocking the boat," the boy muttered, but a moment later, the second plane's nose lifted only a little, then she hit the ground so hard that she rebounded and leaped twenty feet before hitting again on her wing and smashing with a sickening crash. It did not take Austin long to get to the ground and start for the plane, which had burst into flames. He could tell that she was an ancient model, she looked like some that had been salvaged after the war, and he guessed that her pilot was an amateur. By that time he was beside the wreck. The pilot was huddled forward in his seat, apparently unconscious, and would be consumed with his machine by the flames in a few minutes. Swiftly the boy set to work

unfastening the safety straps, and to his astonishment he discovered that the parachute was in place. There wasn't time to give that much thought, the important thing was to get the man out of danger, and in a few minutes the boy had him stretched on the ground, and was rubbing his hands. Finally the chap opened his eyes and blinked.

"That was some drop! How do you feel?"

"Like hash, say, where am I?"

"Cap Rock, Texas. What happened to your crate?" Jim asked.

"Darned if I know. She just turned her nose to the ground and headed there straight. Coudn't do a blamed thing with her," he answered, then he sat up and glanced at the wreck. "Thunderation, I gave fifty bucks for her, and look at her," he wailed.

"Tough luck," Jim sympathized, but he added, "You're lucky that she didn't make hash of you. Why didn't you use the chute?"

"Didn't think of the blamed thing until she was most down. I never practiced with one and I hated like blazes to jump. Hoped the buggy would right herself—she did that before—"

"Well, she didn't this time. Where you heading?" asked Jim.

"Crofton. My mother's there, sick, mighty sick—my sister wired she can't live more than a few hours so I started to see her, gee, am I far from the town?" He managed to get to his feet weakly, and Jim helped him steady himself.

"You have passed it," Jim answered.

"Passed it, why, that last place I went over was Laville. I saw the name on my map," he insisted.

"Then you must have gone out of the course. Crofton is further back. It isn't a very big place, you might have missed it," Jim replied, but he didn't see how the fellow could have done that if he set his course at all accurately.

"Confound it." The chap sat down on the ground and rocked unsteadily. "Now, what the heck—say—" He was on his feet again, his face white and his fists clenched. "I've got to get to my mother—and get there quick. I say, Buddy, I haven't got much money, or anything but I'll give you all I have if you'll take me back to Crofton," he pleaded.

"You look to me as if you ought to go to a doctor," Jim hesitated.

"Doctor nothing, I'll get to one later—I've got to see my mother." His lip quivered like a little boy's and Jim was all sympathy.

"Got any folks in this part of the country?" he asked.

"No. Never been in the blamed state before this morning. My sister came with my mother, she got a kind of heart trouble and needed the dry climate. They're stopping at an inn, a little place on the main road. I've got the card in my pocket. I say, old man—"

"I'll take you down," Jim promised, but for some reason or other, in the back of his mind he was remembering Don Haurea's warning to "watch his step and his wings." It certainly looked as if this chap was exactly what he claimed, yet why hadn't he used his chute, and how did he happen to come so far north of his goal? His instruments must have registered the distance, and surely he was not so inexperienced that he had not calculated how many miles he was traveling. The wreck had occurred in a particularly isolated section. The land about them was a shallow basin, but it was deep enough

so that they could not see or be seen over the rim except by another plane, and there was none in the sky.

"Come along," Jim urged, and slipping his arm under the chap's shoulders started for Her Highness.

X

A WALLOP

As Jim Austin assisted the injured pilot toward Her Highness, his mind was working fast and he was debating to himself whether to put the passenger in the front seat or the back. When he came to think it over, his reason told him emphatically that in entertaining a spark of suspicion he was being a goop of a large order. No pilot would deliberately bring his plane down in a smash and risk his own neck. It was a miracle the fellow came out with a whole bone, and it was evident that he was inexperienced. Jim remembered the first time he had tried out the parachute how he hated like fury to make the jump and might not have done it at all if his flying instructor hadn't dropped the plane from under his feet, so that part of the explanation was certainly acceptable.

The fact that the chap had missed Crofton wasn't surprising either. He'd never been in the state, and often airmen who are familiar with the territory over which they fly, make a miscalculation in setting the course,

and the machine which was now blazing merrily was probably poorly equipped with instruments. In spite of these arguments, the warning of both his father and Don Haurea persisted in urging him to "watch his step and his wings," so to satisfy them rather than because he believed himself in any danger, he concluded that he would take every possible precaution. When they stepped to the fuselage, the boy opened the door to the rear cock-pit. The injured man gave it a quick glance, then drew himself up painfully.

"See you have safety straps and everything back here. Some bus," he remarked with admiration.

"She's a good little crate," Jim answered, and proceeded to help the fellow make himself secure.

"It's mighty decent of you to give me this lift, and help me, Old Timer, I'll pay you—"

"There won't be anything to pay," Jim told him shortly. "I'm glad to get you to Crofton and I hope that you find your mother improved."

"You'll go as fast as you can," the fellow urged.

"You bet," Jim promised. "All set?"

"Great, thanks for all your trouble. I'll never forget it." Jim closed the door, then made his way to his own place, and while he was getting ready, he wondered what he could do to assure his own safety. The idea made him impatient, but he turned the mirror so that he could see the back seat, then remembering the duplicate controls, he hastily disconnected them. This wasn't difficult for they were an extra set put in after Her Highness was finished and were dependent upon the main circuit. He switched them off hastily, took his seat, glanced over his shoulder at the rear cock-pit, and grinned cheerfully.

"How do you feel?" Jim asked.

"Kind of dizzy," he answered, "but in a hurry."

"We'll soon be there. The upper air will have you feeling some better."

He opened the throttle and Her Highness leaped forward eager to be off on her humane errand. In delaying even those few minutes Jim felt that he had been a beastly bounder, so now he made amends by climbing swiftly to five thousand feet, where the

air was wonderfully refreshing, then he leveled off, set his course on a bee-line, and raced the little plane through the heavens at the limit of her increased capacity. He looked at the mirror and saw his passenger slumped down, his head back and his hair blowing, for he had taken off his helmet. Then Jim concentrated on his job. In the bottom of the cock-pit was a new lariat, for his own had been cut when Zargo released him from under the dam. The boy took it up and began looping it to fit its special hook, his eyes on the control board the while. He thought a bit about those extra controls and recalled that the aviation man had urged that when a passenger was in the back seat they had better be disconnected just on general principles because a very serious wreck had been caused by a terrified chap "freezing" to the back controls so the real pilot was unable to manage his ship and prevent a disastrous smash-up that had cost several lives.

"At least this lad isn't such a goop as that," Jim thought and again he glanced into the mirror, but he couldn't see the lad and decided that he had settled low because

of the force of the wind. Her Highness was now tearing at a most gratifying speed toward the boundary of their own ranch, the K-A and the young fellow wished that he could have taken the man to the house where his father could see how badly he was injured, but he didn't blame the chap for being anxious to get to his mother. Austin could barely remember his own mother, but he knew vividly what an empty place she had left when she passed on, and he also knew that Bob would forget everything in the world in order to get to his mother if anything were the matter with her.

The boy glanced over the side and watched Cap Rock, which Old Timers had called "Hog Back," roll under him, then he looked ahead to his left toward the Gordons' ranch houses. This made his scowl and he recalled the vision he had seen enacted in the living room. The experience in the laboratory appeared more like a dream than anything. Being in the air, under the gorgeous blue dome of heaven, made cruelty and wickedness seem utterly impossible. The globe from his elevation looked pure and wholesome, like a child that had just had its face

washed. He wondered what his step-brother was doing, if he was still canning dirt, and he grinned as he thought of Caldwell's astonishment when he learned that his work at the Cross-Bar had been observed by Jim while he was at the Box-Z.

Having straightened the lariat to his satisfaction, he started to adjust it on its hook, but as he did so he noted that Her Highness was wobbling oddly, as if she had struck something rough. He couldn't account for her unsteadiness so he proceeded to give her his undivided attention. He banked, curved, lifted her nose in search of smoother traveling, but she seemed out of balance. Nothing at all serious, but it was puzzling and the boy wondered if the changes made in her that morning were responsible for her unusual behavior. There was nothing to indicate the slightest thing had gone wrong, then he thought of the duplicate controls in the back and made sure that he had completely disconnected them. It occurred to him that the chap sitting in the rear seat might have slipped so far forward that his feet or knees changed something, but that wasn't possible.

The thought of the other man made the

boy glance into the mirror to see if the chap was all right, then he gave a startled gasp, and for an instant was paralyzed with astonishment and horror. He could see clearly that instead of lolling down in pain, the fellow was leaning forward against the edge of the cock-pit. Something small and shiny slipped out of his sleeve, into the palm of his hand and his fingers were closing with deadly precision as he pointed the barrel of the black thing directly at the boy's head. An instant later there came a spitting flash, and simultaneously Jim ducked, the rope dropped from his fingers, and he threw his body as far as he could toward the vacant seat, but something sharp and stinging grazed just above his ear, making his head ring as if a dozen hammers were pounding metal on his skull.

"Gilded alligators, my hunch about that guy was right," he muttered as he felt the warm trickle of blood under his cap. "Whew, I'm probably in for a lot more of that." He was thankful that Her Highness had two front seats and that he could keep himself below the rim of his cock-pit. He managed to make his safety-strap loose enough so

that he could almost lie down, but as he struggled, a second shot tore through his sleeve. He judged that the fellow was now standing at his full height trying to pump him full of lead. Other shots came in quick succession but they did not do the boy any further damage.

"That lad's going to get one grand little surprise. He thinks he can run the bus where he likes from back there, and he can't." Still crouching double, his eyes on the board and also on the mirror, Jim turned Her Highness' nose to a steep angle and sent the plane climbing with a wailing shriek toward the ceiling. At ten thousand feet, he started her on a spiral, as if she had suddenly gone crazy.

"That ought to keep him busy for a while," Jim muttered. The blood trickled around into his eyes, and he wondered in which pocket he would find a handkerchief. "I've got to have my snivel duster, but I have to be mighty careful how I get it." Finally he located one in his breast pocket, and proceeded to stuff it between his temple and his cap, hoping that would keep him from being blinded just when he needed his op-

tics most. Able to see again, he took another look into the mirror. The unwelcome passenger had apparently decided to take charge of the piloting, for he dropped back into his seat. Jim guessed that he was trying to manipulate the useless controls, and he tried to calculate what the man would do when he made the discovery that he could not navigate from the rear cock-pit.

"He'll have to come here," was the only solution. "When he comes he'll not be taking any chances, he'll have that gat wide open and spitting all the way. Gee!" A drowsiness seized him, but he set his lips with grim determination and forced himself to keep his wits about him. The hammering in his head persisted and his shoulder felt numb. Jim didn't dare to glance over the side, but he thought they were still above the Gordon ranch, perhaps at its further end, where at least three square miles of the rugged teeth of Cap Rock would catch them if they were forced down, so he changed the course sharply and sent Her Highness toward the open plain. By that time his stomach felt as if it were detached from the rest of his insides, and he ached

all over, with pain and cramp, but he fought it off as he tried to figure how he might survive the encounter which was imminent. The chap would have to come to the forward cock-pit.

Mechanically Jim picked up the rope and he tried to think of another weapon, but nothing he carried would be of any account against a gun. That was positive. Her Highness was tearing along, the wires shrieking, and again he turned her nose toward the heavens. A second later he could see the chap climb over the edge of the cock-pit, throw himself forward and start to crawl along the slippery fuselage. The gun was in his hand, and he clung with all his strength to keep himself from being swept off. For a second Jim was tempted to do a loop or roll over and drop him off, but that seemed so beastly brutal. He wasn't sure that the fellow's chute was any good, it might not be. Anyway he didn't take the chance.

Seconds passed, then the upper part of the man's body was out of the boy's range of vision in the mirror, so he tipped Her Highness' nose abruptly toward the earth, diving with everything wide open. Then he

executed a half roll which he calculated would partly dislodge the crawler, or at least make him give all his attention to sticking in the plane. Jim waited tensely, his eyes on the back of his own cock-pit, watching like a cat and ready to spring. It seemed as if an eternity passed, then suddenly he saw fingers slide over the rim, clutch desperately, then the arm shot out. Quick as a streak of lightning Jim caught it in a firm grip, pulled and pressed with all his might until he could grab the fellow by the collar, bent his head down swiftly, at the same time bringing up his knee so that it caught the would-be assassin squarely under the chin. He slipped forward in a heap, got another resounding crack in the jaw, after which he went out like a light. With a relieved whistle Jim pushed him out of the way and brought Her Highness to rights. That done he got his unwelcome passenger into the second seat, making him fast with the strap and lariat.

This was barely accomplished when the fellow moved slightly, opened his eyes and stared about in confusion. Jim nodded to him casually, the chap seemed to understand

the situation for he scowled blackly and made a desperate effort to get himself free, but finally gave up the struggle. His lips moved as if he were talking, but the motor made conversation impossible and the young pilot did not consider it necessary to offer him the speaking tube. A few miles ahead, Jim could see the scattered buildings of Crofton and as he knew that the sheriff had an office near the railroad depot, he chose that neighborhood as a landing place. As he got near enough he shut off the engine and glided down.

"Say, Kid, what you think you're doin'?" the fellow demanded.

"I might, if I was inquisitive, ask you the same question," Jim reminded him quietly. His head was spinning and he hoped he'd be able to make a landing but it seemed to him as if the world was pretty dark and was performing a jumping act.

"I thought something happened to you so I came ahead to help," the man declared brazenly.

"I suppose you punctured my head from the same humane motive," Jim drawled calmly.

"Say, I didn't do a thing to you—"

"Don't talk so much, you make the plane nervous." By that time Her Highness was on the ground and to the boy's joy he saw husky young Bill, the agent's assistant, hurry to meet him.

"Hello, Jim—"

"Send some one for the sheriff, or telephone for him, I've got a package he'll want." Bill gave a startled glance at Austin, then bellowed.

"I say, Armstrong, bring the sheriff running, and the doc too."

"I don't need a doctor," Jim protested as Bill stepped close to the cock-pit.

"You're a liar. Your face is streaked with blood. Here, let me give you a hand," he insisted.

"I'll be all right, I want to turn this over and get home—"

"Here's the sheriff now," someone called from the depot as that officer happened to be driving by.

"Looking for me?" He stopped the car.

"Right here," Bill shouted. He was getting Jim loose from the plane and would have

lifted him out bodily, if the boy hadn't put up a fight.

"Hey, leggo, Bill. I'll get down."

"All right, be careful." Jim got his feet on the ground, but he was thankful for his friend's strong arm, which was slipped about his waist.

"What's doing—" the sheriff demanded.

"Officer, arrest that chap. He crowded my plane out of the air, punched me in the jaw, and tied me up in here," the bandit roared furiously. "Arrest him, I say. Don't let him put anything over on you." The man stared at the astonished boy.

"Wall, wall, Jim Austin, you're gettin' to be a real hell-ee-on, ain't you? There, young feller, you needn't be afeard of him no more. I'll put you in a nice place where he can't do no more of his divilment—you'll be safe's in church—maybe more so, I don't know," the sheriff answered.

"Say, you're making a mistake, this fellow is—"

"Say, listen here, young chap. The best thing I could do for you right this minute is hang you to the nearest tree en be done with it. Soon's it gets round these parts that

you pulled a gun on Jim Austin, there ain't a jail in the hull darned state that'll be strong 'nough to keep the crowd back. They be wantin' a neck-tie party with you the guest of honor, and like as not they'll have it. We never interfere with a mob—tain't good sense. Here, now, these'll make you more comfortable." He slipped a pair of handcuffs in place, while Bill helped Jim into the freight office.

"Doc's here." The little country doctor came bustling in. He didn't have a hat on, but he had his bag, and after taking a swift glance at his patient, he set to work cleaning and bandaging. In a few minutes there was a crowd gathered, the prisoner was turned over to a deputy, and the sheriff promised to be back in a few minutes for details of the battle.

"Hey, Billie, is it someone from that greaser Don's place?" a small boy whispered as he edged close.

"I don't know where he's from," Bill replied, and although Jim heard the query, at the moment he did not give it much thought.

"You better let me take you home in my

car," the doctor offered. "I will not permit you to pilot the plane."

"Say, Bill, telephone to Bob at the Cross-Bar, don't call the K-A, it would scare the parents to death. The kid will come down and pilot us both back. Someone can bring up the car later," Jim requested.

"Sure, that will be all right." Bill succeeded in getting young Caldwell, who promised to come as fast as possible.

"You are a lucky boy, Jim. These are only scalp wounds, but a very little deeper on your head, and you'd be holding a lily. You keep quiet a few days, and you'll be good as new." By the time the doctor was finished, the sheriff returned and got the story of the attack.

"Thunderation, Boy, you know there ain't no inn in Crofton," he exclaimed.

"I know, but I thought he meant that his folks were stopping with some family, and they called it an inn—the way the tourists do. Anyway, that's something that I didn't give any thought to," Jim admitted.

"Wall, I guess I got all the facts. You sure seem to be kind of popular with some guys—two of 'em tryin' to put you out in

lessen a week. Any idea about this lad?"

"Only thing I can think of is that he wanted the plane. You see, his was a pretty poor one, and he may have thought he saw a good chance to get something better," Jim answered.

"He said outside that he came from the Haurea place," the sheriff remarked thoughtfully.

"The Haurea place, he did not!" Jim sat up quickly. "He came from down the Cap—was over the Gordons when I first saw him, and he told me that he flew directly from Laville."

"He's kind of a liar. Well, I'll mosey along. Take good care of yourself. Here, you young ones, don't come in here. Keep out and give Jim room to breathe." He shooed the youngsters before him as he left the building, then Jim looked at Bill.

"I say, what made that kid ask if he came from the Haurea place?"

"Oh, I don't know, old man," Bill evaded.

"Go on, you do so," Jim insisted.

"Well, there's a lot of rumors round town about the greaser Don's place, as they call it, but I've never heard anything worth lis-

tening to. You know kids blab things they pick up. Here comes my mother, and I bet she's got something for you to eat. Swallow it if it kills you or she'll be awfully disappointed. Anyway, it'll be an hour before Bob can get here," Bill urged.

"It's mighty kind of your mother," Jim replied, but in the back of his mind he was wondering about those "rumors," what they were and who had put them into circulation.

XI

THE ATTACK

"Music has charms to soothe the savage breast," said Jim.

"Sure, that's why they put the brass band on the dog's collar," grinned Bob, and dodged a hand full of grid leaks that his step-brother fired at him.

"That's a beast of a joke," Jim growled.

"Ain't it so, you battle scarred vet!" It was late in the evening and the two boys were in their own laboratory working on the radio and preparing for the long postponed test. Austin's head was encased in bandages, and the lump on his left shoulder showed where the upper part of his arm was covered with a dressing. From the bunkhouse came the strains of a pathetic ballad rendered by a pair of cowboys on a mouth organ and a Jew's-harp. "If it wasn't for them wounds, Old Timer, I'd be convinced that you have been reciting to me the fancies of a pipe-dreamer."

"They are not pipe-dreams, Bob," replied

Jim soberly. "Anyway, I hope you'll keep your eyes open and not get yourself into the same sort of mess. Watch for bubbles on Her Highness, and any time you find one, keep on the ground until you have tested the wires; and don't fall for any sob-sister act, as I did."

"I'll look out, but gee, that futuristic stuff at the Don's—it's mighty hard to swallow—I wouldn't believe a word of it if I hadn't read the records in that book—I say, Jim, I bet I can make the old Cross-Bar one of the grandest little ranches in the world. The Don is going to show me the result of years of scientific experimenting. Instead of going through all that, and starting where our own people are, I can jump ahead and take advantage of what the Haurea crowd have discovered. They are a grand bunch all right."

"Sure are. I don't see why people around here hate them so. They are mighty decent, every one of them, if a fellow meets them half way," Jim answered warmly.

"I was talking to your father about that before I came up here tonight. Of course you didn't give him more than a sketch of things over there, but he said that only a few in-

dividuals are mentally prepared for really advanced ideas, they have to grow to it, and gulping granite, don't we know that every new invention or discovery as far back as we can study was received with howls of derision; not so many years ago great men were burned at the stake when they tried to change a habit of thought. Well, I'm glad we do not live in those happy days, and I'm glad too, old fellow, that you are going to study over at the Box-Z, that's great."

"Thanks. Are you going to let the K-A have the advantage of your new knowledge?" asked Jim.

"Am I, well I guess. I say, Jim, you are crazy about this place, almost as much as I am about the Cross-Bar. When I prove I've learned things that are valuable, I'll be tickled pink if your father—and you—let me put them into operation here," he said earnestly.

"You have my consent right now. I'd like to see the K-A a top-hole place, but I don't think I've got the make-up to stand by and put those things into operation, but I'll back you to the limit," agreed Jim.

"Bully. Guess I'm a one-track brain kid,

but you'll always have half a dozen irons in the fire. I say, we promised to go to bed early, and it's long past that now. I'm wondering if that guy you picked up is connected with the Gordon gang. Seems queer to me he should have claimed to have come from the Box-Z," Bob remarked thoughtfully.

"The only answer I can find to that is he may have wanted to make trouble for the Don. I figure he may know of the rumors that are floating around Crofton, and perhaps he thought he saw a chance to make things worse. I don't believe for a minute that he just happened to drop down and beg a ride, with the idea of getting Her Highness. I think it was planned, the whole thing, as some part of a scheme the gang is trying to put over."

"I say, perhaps he intended to land you somewhere, kidnap you, maybe. You know Dyke tried to get some information out of us, and this lad may have thought that you knew something about the Haurea place or that treasure they are after. The big boss—if he thought you knew—may have issued orders to get you cornered and make you talk," suggested Bob.

"That might be it, but if it is, you take that warning to yourself, for they'll think that you know as much as I do—watch your step, old man, and most of all, your wings!" Jim urged.

"Guess them's pearls o' wisdom, all right, come on to bed before Mom comes tripping around to make sure that us darlings of hers are in the land of dreams."

"Are you boys still—?" the soft voice broke in quietly.

"We're just going to turn in," Bob assured her. "Thought we'd hang around for another glimpse of you."

"You are a pair of rogues," she whispered. "Jimmy, dear, I hope that you have not been over-doing. I told Bob the last thing to send you to bed early."

"He tried to," Jimmy dear chuckled. If anyone else in the world had dared call him Jimmy, or dear, he would have been fighting mad—but of course Mom was different—it sounded mighty good coming from her.

"Do you feel all right?"

"Fine as silk. We'll be asleep in a few minutes," answered Jim.

"I'm relieved. Good-night, good-night

Bobby." She tiptoed away, and the pair lost no time in getting to bed.

The next three days were spent in comparative quiet on the K-A for Mrs. Austin insisted upon grounding Jim. He was glad to give his head an opportunity to heal and Bob devoted himself to entertaining his step-brother or poring over the book on advanced agriculture so he didn't object to the enforced inaction. One afternoon, the pair were on the shady side of the veranda, and suddenly they heard the unmistakable sound of an airplane which seemed to be coming straight to them from the west. Instantly they were both interested to know as much about it as possible so it didn't take them long to locate it in the sky. There were a pair of field glasses near-by, and Caldwell raised them to his eyes and grinned appreciatively at the trim little machine.

"Calico cough drops, Jim, it's one of those autogyros. Anyway, it sure looks like it. Here, have a look." Austin accepted the glasses and studied the oncoming bus.

"That's what it is, all right, I can see the arms that support the rotors. Wonder where she's going!"

"Wish she was stopping here, I'd like to have a look at her," Bob exclaimed. "They say the new models are rip-snorters."

"She can't be stopping because she doesn't show any signs of coming down," Jim remarked, for by now the plane was close to the edge of the Cap, and in a moment more would be directly over the house.

"Well, by gum-and-gravy, she is coming down." Bob raced out toward the corral and Jim followed more slowly. There was no doubt about it, the machine was going to land and Austin looked around anxiously to be sure that she had sufficient space for a run. "Look at her." The engine had been shut off and the autogyro looked as if it were dropping straight to the ground, and she was almost. In a moment she lighted, and stopped almost immediately.

"Some buggy," Jim gasped with admiration. Up to that time it had not occurred to him to wonder who might be dropping out of the sky to pay them a visit, for it was apparent that the pilot, who was unfastening his helmet, thought he had reached his destination. Bob was already beside the cock-pit, then he bellowed.

"Hey, Jim, telephone for those horseshoes. We promised to decorate these Mounties if they landed here. Gee—it's good to see you—and how the heck did they happen to let you across the border?"

"Shush," warned Sergeant Bradshaw.

"We disguised ourselves as the Flying Buddies," added Allen Ruhel.

"Bet you never could have gotten out of Canada if you hadn't," Jim declared.

"When they thought it was us they knew you were all right," added Bob.

"You're all wet. When they thought it was you they chased us out of Quebec," Bradshaw corrected solemnly. Just then Mr. Austin rode in and dismounted to greet the new arrivals.

"Meet the parent," Jim introduced. "These are the two Mounties we had to keep from being skinned out of their buckles, Dad, but aside from that, they are all right."

"I am very glad indeed to welcome you both, and Mrs. Austin will join me. We have heard a great deal about you since the boys returned, and it gives me great pleasure to have the privilege of thanking your personally—"

"Tune it out, Dad, they don't like that sort of thing," Jim put in.

"We are mighty glad to meet you, Mr. Austin," Allen Ruhel, who was the chief, acknowledged. "As a matter of fact, we are down here on business—"

"But it's supposed to be pleasure," Bradshaw added.

"Come along and make as much pleasure out of it as you can. You must be tired. Jim, my son, fetch along any luggage, and Bob, sprint ahead and tell your mother—"

"To hide the silver," Jim finished, but his father frowned.

"I'm afraid that you will have a very poor opinion of the American—particularly Texas young people," he said gravely.

"The pair of them just about kept my force on the jump while they were north," Ruhel chuckled. "We wish that we had them on it—"

"Just for a day," Bradshaw added. "We wouldn't let them live any longer than that." They were walking toward the house and presently they were inside and introduced to Mrs. Austin, who received them charmingly; quite as unflustered as if welcoming

a pair of Canadians was no more than a part of the day's work.

"We are very happy to have you with us. Bob will show you to your rooms," she smiled, "or take your bags up if you'd rather have a talk."

"Oh, you needn't rush to scrub," Jim urged. "Is there anything around here that you are looking for?" Bob disappeared with the bags.

"Yes, a couple who are wanted badly—have been wanted for some years in fact, for a whole-sale robbery of mail and pay-rolls, besides a murder. Bradshaw and I are the only ones who saw the pair, so we came to be sure they are the men we want," Ruhel explained as he accepted the comfortable chair offered.

"Wow, that sounds exciting," Jim exclaimed. "Expect to find them in this neighhood?"

"Very near here. Headquarters received a message from Chicago saying they live here, under an assumed name. Instead of going there directly, we decided to stop at the K-A, see what mischief you boys have been getting into, and ask you if you are acquainted with

the men. Of course, that may be a bit embarassing to you, and if you would rather not mix up in the matter, we'll go about it the other way."

"But you, Canadian officers, cannot take them out of the United States," Jim objected quickly.

"Not without legal formality. However, that isn't so important. Identifying them is the first step, and your own Federal men are even more anxious to get them than Canada is. Their records in both countries will put them behind bars for the rest of their lives, at least, and that is what we want done with them."

"Well, sniffling tail-skids, who are they?" Jim asked excitedly.

"My goodness, I hope we don't know them," Mrs. Austin shuddered.

"The name we were given is Haurea—"

"Haurea!" Jim was on his feet like a shot, and Mr. Austin, who was about to light a cigar, let it drop from his mouth.

"Haurea? Are you sure, Gentlemen?"

"I've got the letter in my bag, and a couple of pictures. They were taken about four years ago and are not particularly good. I

take it that you know them," Ruhel said evenly.

"My dear sir, we do know a family by the name of Haurea, but they are immensely wealthy, have been for generations—"

"You're barkin' up the wrong tree, Chief, you can be dead sure of that—why, why these people could buy the State—pay the Chicago city debt and never miss it—besides —well if the name is Haurea, it's a different couple using it," Jim declared warmly.

"I think that my son has stated the facts correctly. I am positive that there is some mistake," Mr. Austin added with equal feeling.

"Sprint up and get those papers, Bradshaw, please, and perhaps Mr. Austin can tell us if it is the pair we are after. We certainly do not want to start something we can't finish, and accusing a reputable man is the last thing we mean to do," Ruhel urged. There was a silence then until five minutes later, the sergeant returned with a folder of papers, and handed it to the chief, who took it quietly.

"Hope it isn't your friend, Jim," Bradshaw remarked.

"It can't be," Jim insisted. The chief found the pictures, ordinary snap shots, and handed them to his host, who examined them closely. His son simply couldn't sit still and wait, he had to see immediately, so he looked over his Dad's shoulder. What he saw was two rough looking men in the costumes of lumbermen or miners, one considerably older than the other. Both had beards and side whiskers, and their heads were covered with a mat of tousled hair.

"Those were taken while they were camping, and their guide turned the prints over to us. Both have marked characteristics—"

"It isn't Don Haurea," Jim whistled with relief, "Not for a minute."

"No, I'm positive of that," his father added. Just then Bob entered the room and Bradshaw handed him the snap shots.

"Recognize these chaps?" Caldwell looked, then went to a better light, and scrutinized each with the greatest care.

"Sure," he announced finally. Jim gulped.

"Who are they?" Ruhel asked.

"Couple live on the Cap—I mean down the Rock—name is Gordon," he answered. "Are you after them?"

"If it's the right ones," Ruhel replied. "Sure it isn't another rancher named Haurea?" Bob laughed heartily.

"Before you go, I'll get the Don to meet you, then you'll see the joke," he answered, then added, "What made you ask if it is Don Haurea?" Bradshaw explained, and the boy frowned. "Why there isn't a bit of resemblance. Wonder why anyone should send the police rapping like that!" He looked quickly at Jim, who took the pictures again. Sure enough, he recognized the pair and his heart sang.

"I'm mighty glad that you came here first, but you've got to do some tall figuring to get those lads—I'll bet a Canadian cent against Her Highness."

"Well, let's talk the thing over and see how we'd better act in this matter," Ruhel proposed.

"We ought to dope out a way we can get to see them," Bradshaw suggested.

"They are giving a barbecue tomorrow," Bob volunteered. "Wanted us to do some air stunts by way of entertainment."

"But we're not going to do it—"

"Pshaw," Ruhel exclaimed. "I've done

some stunting. Could you get me in on it?"

"I might call up Arthur, Jr., and see." Caldwell went to the telephone and in a moment was informing young Gordon that they had an aviator friend who would like to attend the barbecue and he was willing to do some simple stunts, nothing very elaborate because he had no paraphernalia with him. Gordon promptly invited the friend and the matter was settled.

"Well, that's that, but look here, Ruhel, I'm not pilot enough to run a plane while you stand on your head," Bradshaw announced emphatically. "Maybe Bob can do it, but I won't. I never chauffeured one until we started down here."

"I don't mind doing it, if the parents are willing, but not with your machine. I don't know her well enough," Bob told them.

"Take Her Highness, you know her," Jim suggested.

"Don't mind doing that," Bob agreed.

"I don't know—" Mrs. Austin looked at her husband.

"I shouldn't like to think that Bob let you break your neck," said Mr. Austin, although he did not like to refuse permission.

"It won't be anything to worry about, not any more than ordinary flying," Bob argued.

"You can be quite sure that I shall do nothing very spectacular," Ruhel promised, "nor dangerous." So the matter was settled in that way, and during the evening the two did a little practising together. Later they decided that Bob should pilot Her Highness for the stunting, and that Ruhel should also attend the barbecue in the police plane.

"I don't want to go to the show because I told Don Haurea that I'd go there tomorrow," Jim told them. "If you think you'll need me—"

"Oh, we shall not. It's merely a matter of getting a look at these men in such a way that they will not be suspicious. If we are sure it is the pair we want, we'll take our departure as promptly as possible and notify the authorities at Washington," Ruhel assured him.

"We'll take you to the Box-Z first thing in the morning," Bob proposed.

"That'll be fine." Jim was mighty glad of the arrangement, for he had already lost several precious days and was anxious to begin serious work.

The plans were completed, then the four friends and the parents spent a delightful evening discussing matters of mutual interest, and at last they retired to be ready for the next day's program. The beginning was carried out, as far as taking Jim to the Box-Z ranch, where the two Canadians were presented to Don Haurea, and if there was any doubt in either of their minds regarding the fact that the tall scientist might be the one they sought, the first glimpse of him dispelled the idea into thin air. After a few minutes casual chat, the three soared away in the two planes, and the man led his young pupil to his study, which was a long room extending the width of the house from the veranda under the pecan trees to the old fashioned portico on the other side.

"How is the head?" he inquired.

"Doing fine, thank you. Mom put that stuff on it, as you suggested, and it's healing wonderfully. Much obliged for sending it over."

"I hoped you wouldn't object to trying it. Our people do not overlook the importance of keeping the body in perfect condition. Your own medical men agree that each in-

dividual renews every fibre in him at least once in seven years—some of them claim it is a great deal less—so our physicians study to aid in that renewal, where there seems to be a need, while our surgeons have far less painful means of alleviating suffering, and assisting an injured bone to do its knitting with better and quicker results."

"Jinks, Don Haurea, I should think that would be something you'd want to tell the world," Jim declared earnestly.

"My dear boy, it is, but I cannot revolutionize the whole human race. However, there will come a time when the intelligent man and woman will have out-grown the idea that disease is necessary. Now they think that a child, from the time it is born, must run the gauntlet from teething to toothlessness, and if he gets very far he's mighty lucky. Suppose we start the morning with a brief examination of what you already know."

"That won't take a minute," Jim answered. He took the place designated, and then began a brief examination, followed by a lengthy discussion, which he found intensely interesting. It was so interesting

that he did not realize that the forenoon had passed.

"I should like you to stay, unless you are too tired, and after lunch there are some preliminary things I want you to read, then we can discuss them before you go home."

"That will be simply great, but I don't want to impose on you."

"It isn't an imposition. I prefer to do some ground work, as it were, myself, but, as soon as you are ready, I'll hand you over to one of the men from the laboratory," the Don answered.

"That suits me just fine," Jim declared enthusiastically.

During the meal, Don Haurea dismissed everything but the jolliest sort of conversation, but before they went back to the study, Jim told him why the two Canadians had come to Texas. However, he did not say that they had been given his name. The boy hated to tell the man that two friends of his should have come with the idea of finding a criminal at the Bar-Z ranch.

"If the Canadian officers find that the Gordons are the men they are seeking, the country will soon be rid of them," Don Hau-

rea remarked. "Now, it's a bit sunny in the portico. Take the books to the veranda side and do your reading there, Jim. I'll be close by."

"Thank you, Sir." Jim found a cool corner, near one of the tall windows, which opened like a door, and took his place. Five minutes later he was completely absorbed in what he was reading and was concentrating so hard that he quite forgot everything else in the world. Once the Don glanced over his shoulder, and another time the man changed his seat for a bench near the door. The whole place was soothingly quiet, nothing, not even the house cat, disturbed the young student.

Austin had been reading nearly two hours when he stopped to go back for a point he had missed, then he noticed the roar of motors thundering up the Cap, and guessed that his step-brother and the Mounties were returning from the barbecue, but he didn't give them much thought. As a matter of fact, he had quite forgotten the air stunts and was hopelessly incurious as to their success. The plane roared on, he saw the Don move toward the door, and was conscious that at

least one machine was racing toward the buildings, a bit to the west.

Then the boy glanced up quickly. That motor was certainly making an unusual noise, a sharp staccato, and a snake-like hissing, followed almost immediately by a crash of glass and splintering wood. Mechanically he sprang to his feet, unable to guess what it was, that was spitting like a small vicious volcano, through the trees. For an instant he stood gasping in astonishment, then there was a thud in the room, Don Haurea's hand went to his chest and he sank to the floor. Austin got to him in one jump.

"Machine guns—the wall—put up the wall—the—" But he could say no more, just dropped back, and Jim looked about in terror. The destructive plane was circling the house, firing with almost every revolution of the propeller, but it was around again before Jim realized what the man had meant by "the wall." Then he remembered and glanced swiftly about for a tiny button, but in his excitement he didn't see one in the room, so he raced out to the veranda toward the Spanish chair where he knew that he could find one without loss of time. He had

barely covered half the distance when he heard the plane crashing above the trees, then a horrible stabbing tearing pain caught him in the side and he started to fall.

"I won't—I won't—I won't," he screamed between set teeth. Blood spurted from his lips and his shirt was drenched, but he fought fiercely with fist clenched, reeled, fell to his knees, but managed to drag himself to the chair, and pull himself up. He had to lean heavily to keep on his feet as he fumbled. Finally his fingers touched the button and with his last ounce of strength, he pushed. A second later he began to slide to the step, he was conscious of seeing the cat racing madly toward the house, but she stopped as if turned to stone, then the world went black and Austin was unconscious.

XII

THE BARBECUE

As the three airmen raced toward the Gordon ranch to attend the barbecue, Bob recalled the warnings of both his father and Don Haurea, and into his mind came an uneasiness that he could not shake off. It occurred to him that young Gordon had an ulterior motive for wanting him and the plane at the celebration and that Arthur might have a plan to get him into a tight corner. The boy was familiar with the usual processes of such an entertainment and he was aware that he could easily be way-laid, slipped into an out building or up somewhere among the huge rocks of the Cap where he would be unable to defend himself. With these things flashing through his mind, he reduced the speed of the plane and executed a wide circle. Taking the speaking tube, he motioned to Allen Ruhel that he wanted to talk.

"What's on your mind?" the Canadian Mounty Chief asked.

"A few days ago Jim was attacked in the plane. That's how he got his head hurt, and I'm wondering if these Gordons, we know they are a bad lot, have some sort of plot they are hatching for today." He went on and gave a brief account of what happened to the dam, the claims of Lily Boome and the fellow Ollie, also the "sob-sister" who had nearly killed Austin. During the recital he was very careful to give no inside details of Don Haurea's part in what happened, except to emphasize the rumors afloat in Crofton regarding hidden treasure on the old estate. "Jim's father told us that men go crazy and don't stop at much if they think they will find gold," he finished.

"Sounds like a hot story," Ruhel admitted. Just then the autogyro came sailing close as if to question the delay. "Signal him to come down." Bob motioned that Bradshaw follow, zoomed high into the ceiling, then glided forward far out on the plain where they could not be observed. After they landed, the two men questioned the boy closely, stood quietly thinking, and finally Bradshaw had a suggestion.

"You keep close to Bob, Chief, stick like a

brother. You can do that without attracting attention because you are to do the stunts together, and I'll circulate among the crowd. Another thing, be careful not to mention Canada—say we are a couple of friends from Vermont."

"That's a good idea. Can you and I stay pretty close to your plane, Bob? I'm thinking they may try to do something funny with it. These Gordons are a ruthless gang and if they want to get rid of you they won't stop at a little thing like killing us both."

"I don't think there is any reason for them to get rid of me, really, but I do believe that they think I know something about the Haurea place and they want to get it out of me," Bob explained.

"Looks to me as if the attack on Jim was with the idea of killing him," Bradshaw declared.

"We doped out that the chap intended to put Jim out enough to make him helpless, then he expected to pilot Her Highness to some place where they could make him talk. If he didn't, of course, there is no telling what they would have done."

"They would not have turned him loose,

that's a cinch," Ruhel replied. "Is there anyone who will be in the crowd today that you can trust to watch the plane?"

"There's Bill—the fellow from the depot, if he's there he'll be glad to hang around. He's crazy about it, and I'll give him a ride —Jim promised him one some time ago," Bob told them, so the plan was settled, and the three went soberly back to their cockpits, but the two Mounties were glad that they were well armed. Her Highness and the autogyro covered the miles at a good speed and Caldwell selected an open meadow below the house for a landing site. It seemed to the boy that the two planes could be more easily observed from that section and during the performance it would be best for the audience. As they glided down, they saw quite a number of people had already assembled, and others were coming from the different points of the compass. By the time they were on the ground, young Gordon was coming to greet them.

"We sure do appreciate you-all flying over," he said cordially.

"I'm glad to have something to show my guests," Bob answered, and proceeded to

introduce the Canadians as friends of his aunt in Vermont. "They dropped in on me yesterday so it's up to me to keep them amused."

"This is going to be a real treat for us," Ruhel spoke up and Bob nearly fell under the cock-pit at the chief's New England accent.

"Nothing like this in our part of the world," Bradshaw added in a nasal drawl that would have made the Fentons squirm. "Farms up our way are not very big; I expect you could put our whole state in a corner of your ranch."

"We do things in rather a big way," Gordon answered condescendingly. He was highly flattered by the manner of his unexpected guests.

"We're obliged to you for having us," Ruhel told him.

"You're going to help us out, and we're obliged for that," Gordon answered with a smile, then he added, "A little later, I'll show you over the ranch, or get one of my men to escort you around. How long are you staying in Texas?"

"Only a few days," Ruhel replied. "Sorry

we can't make it longer." Just then someone called to Arthur, who had to excuse himself. The air men explained that they would follow later, but they needed to take a look about in order to get ready for the exhibition.

"That will be about the middle of the afternoon," Gordon announced. "How does the time suit you?"

"Fine, because the sun will be going out of the way," Bob replied, then Arthur hurried off.

"That's one of the guys we came for," Ruhel said softly as he tinkered about the cock-pit.

"Sure, now I'll get a look at the father. This will be a mighty profitable trip for us, Old Thing."

"Hello, Bob!"

"Hello yourself, Bill. Come over here and meet my friends. I'm hoping that you will keep a sharp eye on the planes for us. We're going to do stunts this afternoon, nothing much, but we don't want to get up in the air and discover that some souvenir hunter has made away with the tail."

"Sure, I'll be glad to stick around. I'll

get a couple of other fellows with me. We've been to so many barbecues that they are an old gag, but an airplane is different," Bill agreed heartily. He was promptly introduced to the Canadians who sized him up as most trustworthy.

"That will be good of you. This is our first visit to Texas and our first barbecue, so we should like to see everything that we can. If we can leave the planes in your care, it will relieve us a lot. You'd never suspect how many perfectly respectable citizens get some kind of itch for a piece of a flying machine and they take something small that won't be noticed. They never think that the pilot may get killed when he goes up in the air," Bradshaw explained elaborately.

"You can bet I'll take a pop at anyone who comes fooling around," Bill assured them soberly.

"Jim promised you a ride. How would you like to go for a hop now? We'll give you a longer one some other time," Bob offered.

"I say, that would be corking, Old Timer."

"Come along and practice a bit," Bob suggested, so Ruhel climbed into the rear cockpit and presently the three were in the air.

Bill clung to the seat, and watched, in fascinated amazement while the Canadian walked with great unconcern on the top of the fuselage, then out onto the wings. The two air-men took the opportunity to make a careful survey of the activities going on below them, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. The guests were arriving in automobiles, various kinds of vehicles, and any number on horseback. These were the most picturesque, but Bob hardly gave them a glance. After fifteen minutes, they came down, then Bill took his place, deeply impressed with the importance of his undertaking, while the three airmen sauntered about.

The "Vermonters" exhibited greatest interest in everything that was going on, listened to elaborate tales of horsemanship and daring, and finally met the elder Gordon, who was most amiable. The morning passed quickly. Bradshaw endeared himself to all the small fry by taking them for joy rides, while Bob and Ruhel occasionally took up a load and "tried out the air." The sun was at high noon when the feasting started, and the three friends managed to

get a few minutes where they could exchange confidences.

"This looks like a great mixture of people —a real melting pot," Bradshaw remarked softly.

"I never saw so many 'outsiders,' I mean men who do not look as if they are Texans," Bob answered. "I noticed a whole gang of them come in a flivver. Bill said they landed in Crofton a few days ago."

"Maybe they'll bear watching," Ruhel suggested.

"They will," Bradshaw answered. "There's something in the wind. I've noticed half a dozen talking out of the corners of their mouths to each other and sort of passing on some word. Any idea what's brewing, Bob?"

"Not even a small one," Bob answered.

"You know, Chief, we just came down here to identify that pair. Why not make an excuse to get away, go phone to the Federal men who are waiting at Laville, and let them gather up the bunch while the gathering is good?" Bradshaw proposed.

"It's a rattling good idea. I've been mulling it over in my mind, but this old imp of Satan and his son might get suspicious. If

they do, the U. S. men couldn't see them for dust," Ruhel objected.

"Yes, that's so, expect it's better to linger around, but I was thinking of the kid. I've got an American hunch that there will be something doing this afternoon and he'll be the goat."

"Don't worry about me. I'll look out. Bill says that no one has been near the planes, not to touch them, just the folks that are interested, but they keep at a respectable distance," said Bob. "Here comes someone."

"I'm bringing you-all a cocktail," the chap called.

"Sorry but we'll have to pass up that sort of thing until after the stunts." Ruhel spoke quickly. "We must keep our heads about us for the present, then we can dive in and have a real good time."

"You may not get any then," the chap grinned. "Great guns, they're drinking it fast as it can be mixed—there's a real live kick in it—like a mule's," he told them.

"Then we sure do have to wait, but can't you hide a few pints?" Bradshaw said.

"I'll try," the chap promised, and went

back to the main part of the picnic, while the three exchanged glances.

"They'll be getting drunk as lords," Bradshaw announced.

"Yes—a whole house full of lords," Ruhel added.

Whether many of the men were intoxicated or not, the crowd began to get more and more noisy, and several times the airmen were urged to drink, but they always managed to get out of it with the same excuse. One rough looking fellow leered at them drunkenly.

"Better take it now, boys, while you can enjoy it," he urged, then laughing heartily at his own joke, he staggered off.

"That might be taken as meaning almost anything," Ruhel said softly, and his companions nodded, but neither of them had an idea of what the fellow meant.

"I think I'll do some snooping around," Bradshaw proposed. "Why don't you two get into the air, drag out your stunts, and see what you can see from above?"

"That's the thing. You watch your step, Brad, you know this pair was not born yes-

terday and they may suspect that New England identity."

"I'll do that." Bob and Allen got up leisurely and strolled to Her Highness, where they found Bill astride the fuselage, armed with a huge bone in one hand and a sizable hunk of cake in the other.

"Going up?"

"Yes. Thanks a lot, Bill, for helping us. I won't forget that other ride, then you'll get a real treat," Bob told him.

"That's all right. Say, ain't you kind of early starting?" He jumped from his perch reluctantly.

"A little, but Bob is going to put her through some paces. You might pass the word on to the crowd."

Five minutes later the pair were a thousand feet above the ground, then Bob zoomed, spiraled, circled, rose, shot down, rolled and went through dozens of stunts that thrilled the audience below. He glanced over to see how they liked it and noticed that most of the huge crowd in the meadow were women and children but he assumed that the men were stationed at various vantage points, and probably some of them were al-

ready too full of liquor to move about a great deal. The boy turned Her Highness' nose high, climbed, then shut off the motor and did a falling leaf drop. He could hear exclamations of dismay from startled members of the crowd, then he pulled her out of it and roared into the sky.

"Suppose I parachute," Ruhel suggested and Bob nodded agreement. In a moment the crowd gasped, as the Canadian jumped off into space, then cheered when the chute blossomed out and the man drifted gently to safety. Bob followed with the plane, but just as Ruhel took his seat again they heard Bradshaw shout and saw him racing toward them at top speed.

"I'll go along and we can do some formation stuff," he called.

"Get a move on," Ruhel urged. He felt that there was something doing.

"Some of that stuff we learned at the aviation school ought to be fun," Brad said as he drew close, then when he was beside them, he added in an undertone. "Come on up, quick, but be careful not to make them suspicious. I saw the Gordons and another fellow go out through the back of their garage.

The car was muffled. We don't want to have them slip through our fingers. Another thing, there's hardly a man on the place, only boys." He raised his voice again, and with a wide grin, he added loudly, "All right, but we don't want to go ripping each other's wings off." He ran to the autogyro.

"I'll beat you up," Bob shouted.

"You can't," Bradshaw laughed defiantly.

The crowd closed in expectantly the instant the two planes were off the ground, and as soon as they were high enough they waggled their wings and began chasing each other in wide circles. Ruhel did not attempt to do any stunts but kept his eyes on the ground beneath them, searching for the limousine, but he did not catch a glimpse of it. The two pilots widened their sweeps, until finally Allen touched Bob's arm and pointed to a gully far ahead. All the boy could make out was some animated specks leaping across, but he guessed they were horsemen and he wondered anxiously where they were going. He knew there was a trail in that vicinity which made a short-cut past the K-A to Pearl River.

"What do you make of it?" Ruhel asked

through the speaking tube, but Bob shook his head. "I'd bet those fellows are up to something and they got this gang here to cover what those rough necks are going to do. Know any place they might start devilment?"

"It might be the Box-Z," Bob answered, but he didn't see how it could be.

"Let's quit fooling around, and find out where they are heading." Bob nodded, and the Chief went on, "Try to keep out of their range of vision. They must be going along among those cliffs." Again Bob nodded, he zoomed high, they were now far south of the Gordon place, so he made a wide circle and with the autogyro right on his tail, he set his course and headed north toward his own home, keeping well over the plain as he flew.

In a short time they had crossed the boundary between the Gordons and the K-A, but on none of the highways did they see an automobile. They were half way across the home ranch when Ruhel motioned him to climb high, so Bob turned Her Highness' nose at a steep angle and zoomed as hard as the plane could carry them to ten thousand feet. When he leveled off, Allen

took the glasses and searched the land rolling away under them. After a moment he motioned Bob to keep on and soon they were nearing the southern boundary of the Haurea ranch.

The boy kept his eyes on the controls, but the thunder of a motor more powerful than the two small machines, made him turn his head, and it was well he did, for a huge plane came tearing out of the sky directly into their path. Bob kicked the rudder and worked furiously for an instant, then the big machine raced by them so close that they could see the two men bent low in front and rear cock-pits. Neither of them paid a particle of attention to their air-companions and in a second they were a mile ahead. Mechanically Bob followed as fast as he could go, his eyes on the monster, which was thundering directly to the Haurea buildings.

The next instant Caldwell almost froze to the controls for he saw the great machine dive low, make a swift sweep, and spit a hail of fire.

"A machine gun, it will rip up the place," Ruhel shrieked, but the boy did not need to hear. He forced the little plane to her best

speed until he was near the scene, then he saw the two men in her cock-pits flop forward, the propeller turn down, and she dived full blast to the ground where she seemed to crack into a thousand pieces. It was intuition, not reason that made Bob zoom high instead of gliding to a landing, and Ruhel caught up the speaking tube.

"Don't hang around up here! Somebody's hurt down there. Dive!"

"It won't do any good," Bob answered. "Signal Bradshaw to stay up, he'll be killed if he doesn't. I know what I'm talking about." He was so very much in earnest that the Chief motioned that the autogyro follow them.

Leaning over the cock-pit, Bob took a swift survey as he circled Her Highness in wide curves that included the entire area covered by the ranch buildings. He saw men tearing toward the place on horseback, some were in carts, a number in automobiles as if they had been organized to make a simultaneous attack from all directions. There were two trucks which careened over the rough roads, and when they stopped, dozens of armed men tumbled out and raced for-

ward. Then the boy saw something red flash up and down, like streaks of lightning. The foremost attackers on all sides stopped in their tracks; others rushed up but could get no further, and horses reared madly, thrashing the air with their hoofs. As they struggled to get back, their riders pitched over their heads.

"What a bedlam! What in blazes has caught them?" Ruhel shouted.

"Electricity," Bob answered. "I knew it would be put on, that's why we stayed up here." As he spoke, a long thing like a rocket hurled through the space beneath the plane, landed behind a shed, opened its full length. Someone leaped out, disappeared into the building, only to emerge a moment later from the opposite door.

Whoever it was wore a suit like the one Jim described as used in the laboratories. With the new arrival came three taller men. Two of them hurried to the house, while the others carried yards of heavy tape which they ran swiftly around an open spot. Then they stared up at the planes, and signaled they could come down. Without hesitation Bob made the descent; it was like gliding

between walls of thin quivering glass, and the autogyro settled close by. In a second Caldwell was out of the cock-pit, his eyes searching for a sign of Jim, then he saw his Flying Buddy lying wounded where he had pitched from the veranda. Instantly he forgot everything else and started to run, but one of the men caught his coat.

"Wait." The boy stopped, then he saw a tall man hurry out of the house, pick up the bleeding boy and carry him tenderly inside. "Now come." The chap led Bob and the two Canadians to one of the biggest trees, where he paused. "Stay here and be patient," he ordered. Sure that his charges were in no danger, the chap hurried away.

"I say—" Bradshaw's face was white. "This is the bloominest dream I ever had—I wish you'd pinch me and wake me up—"

"Keep still, Brad," the chief interrupted quietly.

The sergeant said no more, nor did any of them speak as they stared about them in fascinated wonder. Bob glanced toward the wrecked plane and saw the bodies of the two men being covered with a white cloth. The boy had no fear of the scientific method of

protection, but as his eyes moved to the scene in front of him he was filled with horror. Most of the men caught in that invisible wall stood or sat in the most grotesque attitudes, most of their faces were distorted with terror, just as Dyke's had been that day on the cliff when he too had been prevented from finishing his work of ruthless destruction. Only a few of the captives were known to Caldwell and glancing from one to another he was thankful that none of his friends were among them. Just then a small automobile came clattering in a short cut across the garden and right behind it raced a powerful limousine. The chauffeur ground his brakes and yelled furiously for the other fellow to get out of his way. Bob noticed a big man in the front seat with the driver but the attention of both of them was so concentrated on the obstruction that they were unaware they could go no further. However, the chap in the small car realized that something was amiss, for he reversed suddenly and tried to turn around.

"Get out of the way, confound you," bellowed the big fellow, and Bob recognized the

man as the blustering Burnam, the chap he and Jim had sent on a wild goose chase into Canada. In the back of the car sat the two Gordons, their bodies leaning forward tensely, as if eager to carry out their plans.

"I'm getting out of the way, you big slob," snarled the man in the small car. He turned his machine so sharply that it balanced precariously on one wheel, barely managing to keep upright, then it rattled off faster even than it had come.

"What's the matter?" the chauffeur shouted as he suddenly realized that something was wrong, but no one told him.

"Go ahead! Drive hard, I tell you! I know how to get through that—it isn't anything. Go—step on it," roared Burnam. He grabbed the wheel but the chauffeur shoved him back vigorously. A struggle followed and in a minute the pair burst through the door and tumbled to the ground, Burnam underneath.

"Go ahead yourself, if you know so much about it," the chauffeur roared. He shook himself loose, gave his opponent a hard shove which started him sprawling clumsily, then he was caught and moved no more. The

fellow's mouth dropped at the strange spectacle. As he watched the affair Bob thought it was like a weird sort of comedy but he did not laugh.

"I'll drive through," he heard the elder Gordon announce. The rancher had to get out of the car to make the change, but his son was more agile, and got ahead of him by jumping over the back seat. He grabbed the wheel, released the clutch, slammed the doors, backed, whirled swiftly, and started down the road. The chauffeur tore after him, caught ahold of the spare on the back and swung himself up as the limousine raced at top speed.

"That's young Gordon and he's getting away," Bob shouted excitedly. As he did so, two servants and Zargo came on to the veranda. They glanced after the fleeing bandit. One of them turned back while the foreman of the Box-Z made his way toward the grove. Then Caldwell saw the elder Gordon stare stupidly about him until his eyes rested on Burnam, who had been caught in the act of falling. The rancher took him by the coat and pulled but the effort was futile, so he clasped the ungloved hand in a firm grasp,

bracing his feet against Burnam's. His hat blew off and his mouth suddenly sagged, then he uttered a piercing shriek and was quiet.

Zargo stopped near Bob and the two Mounties glanced indifferently at those held in the invisible wall, then he stepped forward, took the hand of the nearest man, lifted him as if he were a toy and stood him on his feet.

"Oh, oh, oh my God, save me, I've been electrocuted—save me—"

"You haven't been hurt, you fool," Zargo snapped.

"That Greaser-Don is killing us. He killed a fellow named Dyke at the old dam. He's butchering us wholesale," the fellow wept and trembled as if he had the ague.

"You're a liar. What are you doing here?" Zargo demanded.

"We're going to have a neck-tie party and hang that damn Greaser-Don—"

"What are you doing here?" The words came out like a knife and the fellow began to whimper.

"Nothing, I wasn't doing anything, just

came because the boys said we would have a little fun."

"Tell the truth or I'll kick you back there!" The man sunk to his knees and begged pitifully.

"Oh, please don't, I'll tell you. That fellow Burnam and the Gordons said there are billions in pure gold, all refined, hidden under these buildings. They've been getting the crowd together for weeks to rush the place, get rid of the Don, and when we found the gold we'd be millionaires," he wailed. "Today, while the planes were attracting everybody's attention, we came up along the Cap, through the cliffs—that's the truth."

"Take him away." The servant marched the fellow off and as he went, Bob saw a man and a boy come out of the house. He jumped when he recognized Corso and the youngster he and Jim had helped across Lake Champlain, the boy Austin had said was Don Haurea's son. The young fellow walked toward the grove, stopped and stared contemptuously at the prisoners.

"Cowards like you should be branded," he spoke emphatically, "even as Cain was branded, so the God you profess to worship

will know you through all eternity, and the devil to whom you really belong, can claim you as his own. You have attacked our ranch, tried to pillage and destroy our home, to murder my father and one of your own neighbors because you are crazy with greed, mad to possess something which does not belong to you, and something which you do not know for a surety whether it exists. You permit yourselves to be led to your own destruction, like a flock of sheep walking over a cliff. It is a pity there isn't a canyon here so you could fall a thousand feet. The world would be cleaner without you—"

"Second the motion, Old Chap, but what in heck are you going to do with them? Keeping them suspended here as decorations?" interrupted Bob.

"No, Bob Scout. Their sheriff is on his way, and Federal men are flying from Laville. They will be taken good care—"

"The officers better bring a cattle car to take in this band," Bradshaw suggested.

"The sheriff is an old cattle man, so he'll know how to round them all up," volunteered Bob, then he added, "Jim was hurt—"

"He is cared for. Last night I saw a sign

in the sky. I was in a far land, but I saw my father's danger, so we came to him at once. The sign revealed two Flying Buddies, and for them the future is teeming with adventure—"

"That's great, but how is Jim now?" Bob persisted.

"Come you, Bob Scout, and see for yourself," the boy smiled and he led the way into the house. Caldwell forgot all about the wall and the men who were waiting outside for the officers. In the long cool room were two couches, but Bob saw only one and made for it quickly. Austin had already been bandaged, and as his Buddy approached, he opened his eyes, blinked, then muttered,

"The wall, Old Timer—the electric—"

"Silver plated sauerkraut, the wall looks like a piece of over-ripe cheese full of skippers. How are you?"

"Pretty good, but Don—"

"The Don was only superficially injured, thanks to you, Jim, and very happy—as happy as a—" Don Haurea started to speak for himself, but as he hesitated, Bob came gallantly to his assistance.

"As happy as a set of cross-eyed triplets with the itch," he offered.

"That will do nicely," Don Haurea chuckled. "You boys and Yncicea must become better acquainted. My son's slang has been sadly neglected and I fear that his fellow Americans will have difficulty understanding him."

"We'll do our best for him," Bob promised gravely.

"I should like to take immediate advantage of your superior vocabulary," Yncicea grinned broadly.

"You mean that you want to acquire a set of nut crackers," Caldwell informed him.

"The sheriff approaches," one of the servants announced, and from down the road came the honk of a racing automobile. An hour later the officers of the law took their departure with their huge band of prisoners secured under a strongly armed guard.

"Well, our job's ended," Allen Ruhel announced. "We have to thank you Flying Buddies for showing us something neat in the way of bandit capturing, but now we must spread our wings and return to our post."

"You can't go without the horse-shoes," Bob protested.

"Send them to us, or wear them yourselves," Bradshaw answered. "You certainly have earned them from both our governments."

"We'll send them to you," Jim promised. "And don't ever cross the border without them."

"You have to go to the K-A and pick up your luggage. I'll fly back with you," Bob put in quickly.

"Assure your mother that we are taking the best care of Jim," Don Haurea spoke earnestly. "My house is again in your debt—"

"You're all wrong, Don Haurea. Big things just happen, and that's how this started—if we hadn't run out of gas that day we dropped onto your place we would have missed half our lives. Wish you fellows," he turned to the Mounties, "would be sure to tell Mom that Jim isn't very bad off—she won't sleep a wink tonight just worrying about him."

"We'll do our best to reassure her," Ruhel promised. In a little while they had gone.

Jim listened wistfully to the cheerful roar of the engines, and made up his mind that he'd make a record recovery, then take a holiday in the air, but when he thought things over, he decided being grounded at the Haurea's woudn't be half bad—in fact, he expected to have a whale of a time.

THE END